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The Cruel Fairy Tale of Princess Beauty

This story serves as a prologue of sorts to Acerola Bon Appétit (though it was originally published in the Shinobu fan book before appearing in this novel).

The following is a true story from six hundred years ago. However, I would prefer you think of it as fiction. Why? It is too old a story to have much measure of authenticity, and it has neither lessons nor morals—I am sure such a story would be better taken as a lie.

Around six hundred years ago, in a country whose name has been lost to time, there was a very beautiful girl. The only daughter of an affluent noble, her portrait adorned the homes of every family in the nation—there were none who did not know of her beauty.

Her smooth blond hair, her large eyes, her small head, her bright red lips, her delicate neck, her gossamer skin, her fingers like slender icefish, and her slender, long legs, flowing down from her thin, high waist.

Men and women, young and old, regardless of status were all mesmerized. Simply for her beauty, she was honored with a title by His Majesty the Emperor; the whole nation called her

"Princess Beauty", and loved her. The rumors spread, and the citizens formed a great line before her castle, trying to catch a

glimpse of her. And so, the rare charm of Princess Beauty far exceeding their expectations, they brought her gifts. Day after day, the mountain of presents before the castle grew larger.

The musician said, “I have made Your Highness’ beauty into a song. Please accept it,” and played his violin.

The poet said, “I have made Your Highness’ beauty into a poem. Please accept it,” and his voice resounded in recitation.

The artist said, “I have made Your Highness’ beauty into a sculpture. Please accept it,” and carved a hundred statues.

But none of their gifts made the princess smile. In deep melancholy she gazed at the mountain of presents, and yet, the way that sorrow tinged her face was so beautiful that nobody noticed she was not smiling.

“Nobody will look at me,” the princess lamented, alone in her room. “They extol me as beautiful, beautiful, but they say nothing more. They know nothing of what kind of person I am.

They do not know how I am on the inside.”

That was Princess Beauty’s distress.

Everyone, certainly, was charmed by her beauty. They praised her. Above all else, they looked at her. However, they simply looked at her outward appearance, and no matter what she did or what she said, they paid no attention to her behavior or her actions.

Nobody knew how she was on the inside; nor did they try to learn.

Whatever she did, whatever she said, they thought of nothing but the phrase “Princess Beauty”. Whether she succeeded or failed,

whether she did right or wrong, their evaluation was always the same. Whatever she did was beautiful. Beautiful asleep and beautiful awake.

"Princess Beauty" was the perfect name for her.

Is such beauty as that not rather devilish in nature?

"It hardly seems to matter whether or not I have a will of my own. But I am not a slave to my appearance. This beauty with which I so happened to be born has proved nothing but a nuisance. I want them to see how I am on the inside, not just on the outside."

To not rely on her own beauty.

An old witch who had lived in the country since ancient times was moved by her magnificent strength of will.

She stole into the castle at night, originally simply curious about the rumors she had heard; however, she decided to grant the princess' wish.

"Princess Beauty. I will render your beauty transparent, such that nobody will be able to see it.

Instead, I will make it so everyone around you can see your inner heart. From now on, it will be a matter of how you are on the inside."

The old witch chanted a spell and waved her wand, the princess' gossamer skin became truly transparent.

"Thank you. Thank you."

"Princess Beauty" was grateful from the bottom of her heart.

A heart now in plain sight of all.

Her exterior beauty cleared away, the princess' exposed heart was unparalleled in its beauty.

Her true nature, which until then was concealed by her resplendent appearance, had been made visible by the old witch—even while she remained inside the castle, its radiance spread through all the corners of the nation.

Ashamed of never being able to see the utter beauty of his daughter's heart, the moment after saying his morning greetings, the princess' father jumped off the balcony to punish himself.

Proud of giving birth to a daughter of such magnificent disposition, as if in so doing she had completed the role for which she had been born into the world, the princess' mother peacefully passed away after eating breakfast.

The musician, believing Princess Beauty's kindness to be altogether inexpressible through song, instead offered her his most precious belonging, more precious than his life—cutting off the hands he used to play his instruments, he offered them to the princess as a suitable gift.

The poet, believing Princess Beauty's wisdom to be altogether inexpressible through poetry, instead offered her his most precious belonging, more precious than his life—tearing out the tongue he used to recite his poems, he offered it to the princess as a suitable gift. The artist, believing Princess Beauty's bravery to be altogether inexpressible through sculpture, instead

offered her his most precious belonging, more precious than his life—gouging out the eyes he used to inspect his materials, he offered them to the princess as a suitable gift.

All the nation's citizens burned the portraits of the princess which, until then, they had treasured. They wondered why they had been so dedicated to such a pointless decoration.

More importantly, they thought, look at the purity of "Princess Beauty". Look at her righteousness. Who could have imagined such a meritorious heart existed in the world? Is that not true beauty?

But not everyone owned things more precious than their lives. So, reluctantly, begrudgingly, thinking that such trifles could never be suitable for the princess, they offered her their lives.

They offered up their own lives, their relatives' lives, their children's lives, their grandchildren's lives. The mountain of gifts before the castle became a mountain of corpses, and it did not take much time for it to grow taller than the castle walls.

"Ah! Such tragedy! To think it would come to this!"

Despairing at the mountain of bodies and river of blood that had been sacrificed for her sake, the princess went to the old witch to try to lift the magic spell. But it was too late: the old witch was the very first to behold the princess' inner beauty, and had long since offered up what was more precious to her than her life—the head in which she had cultivated many long years'

worth of knowledge. The princess broke down crying before the old witch's severed head.

That pitiable form, that beautiful heart which sheds tears for others, bewitched the nation more and more. They scrambled and competed to offer the princess their lives, or what was more precious than their lives. To console the princess, they threw their lives away one after another, smiling all the while. They seemed so very happy to be able to behold her beautiful heart without being deceived by her appearance, and to die for her sake.

The ill repute of the growing mountain of corpses—or rather, the castle of corpses—naturally became well-known in the imperial capital and neighboring countries; however, whenever the latest armies would come rushing in, they would succumb to Princess Beauty's power. Their preconceptions and prejudices swept away, their hearts washed clean, happily and of their own desire, they became part of the mountain of corpses.

"Enough. Everyone is dying. Everyone is dying for me. I cannot save any of them. The more I do, the more I speak, people die. I wish only to die."

But she was unable to die. The strength of her heart would not permit it. She could not even go mad.

"In that case, go on a journey."

The old witch's severed head spoke. The tears the princess had spilled caused a miracle. For just one moment, the old woman had come back to life.

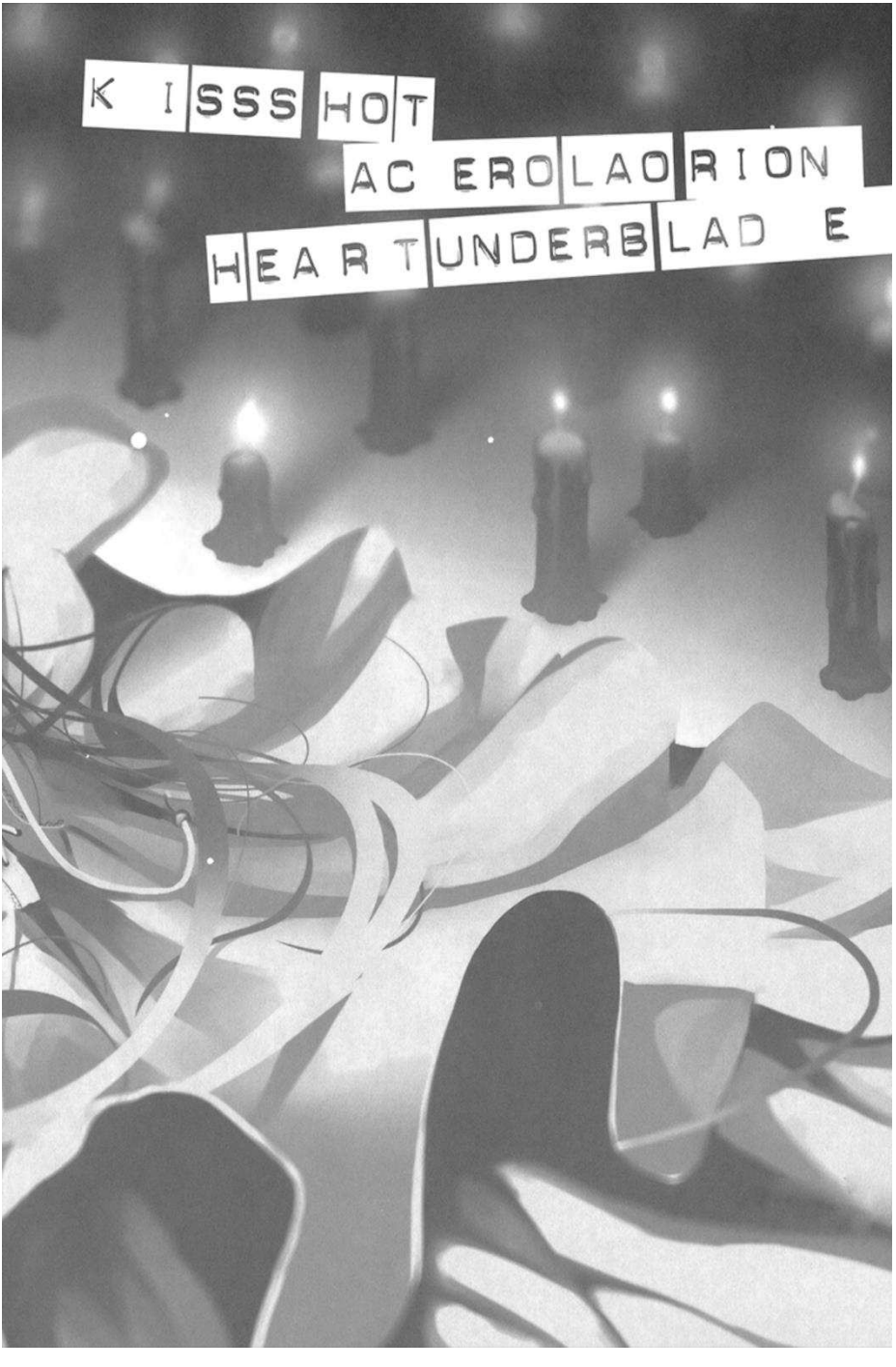
“Someday, you may be able to help those who die the sake of your accursed beauty. Until then, distance yourself from people. Live alone, and do not grow close with anyone. You mustn’t stay in one place for too long. If you do, people will soon come to sacrifice their lives to you.”

With that, the old woman breathed her last once again.

Thus, “Princess Beauty” departed the castle that had been stained bright red with the color of blood and the great mountain of corpses beside it, and set off on an unending journey. In order to prevent any more people from dying, she followed the old witch’s curse-like advice. It was a lonesome flight, one in which nobody could accompany her. It was some time after this that she became a vampire, but these were the circumstances in which the princess—Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade’s bloodstained, vampiric legend began.

And six hundred years later, for the first time, she was able to save one tiny life that had been sacrificed to her pure heart.

Princess Beauty—End


KISSSHOT
ACEROLAORION
HEARTUNDERBLADE

Acerola Bon Appétit 001

Time for Shinobu's origin story–Shinobu time, if you will. Acerola Bon Appétit is another beautiful Off Season arc, and a highly unusual one for the series.

I'm the one who thought up the name Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade. If I may sing my own praises, it's cool. It's tough. A fine, first-rate name—and don't you think the finest of women deserve the finest of names?

That Kiss-Shot part is especially good.

I'm really pleased with it.

There's a nuance of "eat like you're giving a kiss" about it, but you know, even if that implication doesn't come through, it just sounds naturally stylish.

Before I named her, she was called Princess Acerola.

Before that, Laura.(1)

Upon her royal ascension, Laura became Princess Acerola–well, it's not that bad of a name for a human, but it's a little too sweet.

People won't believe your bluffs.

Feels like a name for an elegant, refined lady.

Since she really used to be an elegant, refined lady, that name was fine for when she was human–however, it wouldn't do at all for a vampire. Might even say it's impermissible.

It's no good.

If you want to be a proper vampire, the first thing you need is a name that strikes fear in people's hearts.

It's like becoming a full-fledged adult.

Well, more like becoming a full-fledged demon.

So I thought something up.

First and foremost, it's noble; second, it sounds cool, third, it's easy to remember, and finally, it bears enough evilness that people would hesitate to say it out loud–a first-rate name.

A fine name befitting a fine woman.

I made that princess into a vampire, so it was my duty to name her.

…But honestly, I regret doing it just a little bit. No, I have no doubts at all about the name itself–

I'm proud of thinking up a name that fit her so perfectly, that fit her future so perfectly.

But in the end, maybe I shouldn't have given her a name–look, it's a saying, right? Like, if you name a pet, you'll become attached to it.

It's shamefully unbecoming for a vampire to get attached to a human–though even now, I'm not certain if that attachment was due to friendship, affection, or even lust.

But there's one thing I can say for sure.

It wasn't appetite.

After all, Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade wouldn't work very well as the name of an entrée, would it?

002

"I truly do not presume to be worthy of a name like 'Princess Beauty' anymore."

Somehow or other, it seems I've died again.

Such was my vague deduction as I slowly regained consciousness–even if dying is somewhat common for me, my death this time seemed to have been rather gruesome.

Why, because after I sluggishly awoke, the first thing that entered my field of vision was my own severed head rolling around the floor–its neck twisted round, as if it had been violently wrenched off.

The severed head was staring at me bitterly through its vacant eyes–now that the torso has come back to life, the head that once bossed it about would soon succumb to a fate of crumbling to dust, so I could understand the bitterness of that gaze.

Before, when my head was torn off (or was it severed?), I came back to life through my head, and it was the torso that returned to dust; so even I don't understand the basis of the current circumstance.

Well, if I came back to life through both my head and torso like a lesser creature, the number of me's would grow infinitely and my identity would be what crumbles, so maybe it's fine like this.

But even though I've grown accustomed to those resentful looks, if they're from my own body parts, the flavor is a little different–flavor, yes.

I casually reached over and grabbed some of its hair.

Beautiful blonde hair, if I say so myself.

The light's gone out from its eyes, but those pupils are the same gold color.

They say gold has no charm, but these gold hair and gold eyes of mine are quite complex and mysterious–I sank my fangs into the back of the head. Eating through hair and bones, simply exquisite.

The texture of meat and bones and blood, even brains, mixing together in your mouth is just to die for–the feeling of crushing eyeballs with a squelch, I could get used to this…

It's been so long since I've eaten my own head, and it's still out of this world.

A precious foodstuff I can only enjoy for a moment before it vanishes–I thought as I chewed.

Finally, as I played with the melting cervical vertebrae by rolling them around my mouth, trying to enjoy that moment before the vanishing process takes its course, I heard a voice.

"Uh…"

It was a voice like a bell rolling before me, as I was rolling the vertebrae in my mouth.

"I wanted to ask this before, but… is that good?"

"Delicious as always, of course. It's my head, you know?"

I replied immediately.

It was hard to talk with a mouthful of neckbones, but since they were still too big to swallow, I pushed them to the edge of my cheek–like a squirrel's cheek pouch.

“But it doesn’t really matter if it’s good or not. Even if it was disgusting, I’d eat it.”

I eat what I kill.

That’s how I live.

After I explained that, she–Princess Acerola vaguely agreed.

Like she didn’t really understand a thing.

It’s not like I particularly wanted her to understand, but what I just couldn’t stomach was the fact that she wasn’t nervous at all in front of me.

Far from it,

“You really ought to stop.”

She spoke as if in careful consideration, to me, me of all people–a human like her, in a human’s place, said something so unlike a human.

I got annoyed, and gathered up the seven vertebrae in my cheek pouch and crunched them all–damn it, I should have made them last longer…

“Don’t criticize other people’s eating habits, Princess.”

“I would certainly have something to say about the habit of eating one’s own severed head, but that is not my point of concern.”

Princess Acerola said.

She really did sound concerned about something, and–something entirely inexcusable, to me–

actually, with no great lie, she was concerned about me.

I understand that much.

It’s extremely irritating.

The head I’d eaten could boil in my stomach.

“What do you mean, that’s not what you’re concerned over. Why would a princess of a ruined country possibly be concerned about me?”

“I am saying that you ought to give up these murder attempts–because doing so is absolutely impossible.”

I see.

That’s what she wanted to say.

Hearing that, I understood the way I’d died this time–the same cause of death as the last time, the time before last, and even the time before that, so it would seem.

Last time, my body exploded.

The time before last, my heart was gouged out.

And the time before that, I was smashed into smithereens.

Even if the ways I’d died have been different–the cause of death has been the same.

Cause of death: Princess Acerola.

Among the humans, she seemed to be known as “Princess Beauty”, but I certainly won’t use that name–that name is no good, I think.

A woman who’s killed a vampire like me four times including this one shouldn’t have such a sentimental name.

I said so, and,

“I truly do not presume to be worthy of a name like 'Princess Beauty’ anymore.”

Princess Acerola said, shaking her head from side to side.

Well, even that cheerless gesture could be called beautiful–and I’m sure that modest attitude was even more beautiful than that.

“However, I am all but vexed to have caused you to die over and over again–if only you would stop trying to kill me, you would not die even once.”

Tsk.

Indeed I wouldn’t.

Although she says it with a gentle face, she certainly doesn’t distort what she really thinks–

that’s yet another reason for this woman to be called “Princess Beauty”, I suppose. Might be the biggest reason.

A strong will, and a strong conviction.

Those really are great things.

Not budging an inch before a vampire.

I couldn’t help but feel some admiration, despite myself–though that admiration itself may have been the cause of my last four deaths.

Furthermore, although the cause of death itself lies in Princess Acerola, the real perpetrator was me of all people–the one who killed me was me.

I smashed myself to smithereens.

I gouged out my own heart.

I ruptured my own body.

And then, this time, I plucked off my own head.

Since memories from the moment of death are fairly hazy, I can’t say much for certain myself, but according to the explanation from the princess herself, this is how the mechanism seemed to work:

Whenever I tried to injure this woman, I’d succumb to a fierce sense of guilt, and the vector of attack turned entirely against myself–something like that.

Self-destruction. Self-damage, self-injury.

A simple description would be something like, “the ability to repulse attacks,” but the difference is that it’s not an ability, and therefore Princess Acerola can’t control it at all–like a reflex.

That’s it.

Everything, including the self-attack impulse and guilty conscience, occurs in my mind, not hers–to use an analogy from Eastern martial arts, it’s like sumo wrestling with yourself.

It’s more foolish than absurd, and it’s amusing enough that you could call it a rather high-grade comedy–unable to permit yourself to harm the excessive beauty of “Princess Beauty”, you end up punishing yourself.

Engaging my heart in such a motion, even while it’s dubious whether or not I even have one…

it’s like a bad joke.

Seriously.

Really, I’ve taken my own life four times including this one because of “Princess Beauty”–for the sake of “Princess Beauty”. It’s not all that unusual for me to die, but even so, I knew that Tropicalesque would think my current state of affairs was pretty disagreeable.

I said it was four times, but since my memories are still vague, I might actually have killed myself many more times than that.

Well, I’m the only one who can kill something like me anyway, so if that’s how it is, then that’s how it is.

However, it wouldn't be very difficult to escape from this state of affairs–on the contrary, it'd be exceedingly easy.

Just as Princess Acerola said.

She's right.

If I follow that impartial, selfless, beautiful advice, I ought to stop trying to kill this woman–if I don't try to kill her, I won't succumb to that deep guilt, and I won't try to punish myself.

I won't kill myself.

If I try to kill, then I'll be killed, and if I don't try to kill, then I won't be killed–based purely on such a simple axiom, from the clever princess' view, the reason for my actions must seem incomprehensible.

But.

I can't follow her advice.

First and foremost, I utterly detest following people's advice–if they tell me to do something, I unconsciously start wanting to do the opposite.

And second of all, strictly speaking, I'm not trying to kill Princess Acerola.

Even if I'm told it's possible, for me to stop doing something I'm not even trying to do is quite impossible indeed.

I'm not trying to kill her.

I'm trying to eat her.

It's not bloodlust, it's appetite.

"Is that so. Well, I suppose there's no helping it."

Princess Acerola said, as if she was giving up.

No, well, there's no way she's given up.

Endowed with the strength to absolutely never give up, suffering from a cursed,

absolute beauty that cannot give up–she truly can't give up hope even for a monster like me.

When things are laughable, or when it's hard to laugh.

At foolish things–at beautiful things.

Even getting abducted in the middle of her journey and being miserably confined in my

"Corpse Castle", this princess earnestly thinks of me as pitiful.

That attitude, that nobility.

I can only say it tantalized my appetite.

"By all means, eat me if you will. If you can."

"Oh, but of course!"

Then, for a fifth time, I sprang at Princess Acerola–unfortunately, I didn't have the manners to say grace before the meal.

And so, even though I sprang at her in what should have been a surprise attack, when I tried to sink my fangs into Princess Acerola's soft, fair skin, my consciousness broke off with a snap.

Hmm.

Somehow or other, it seems I've met with my fifth death.

003

"I'll treat him as emergency rations at best."

Somehow or other, it seems I've died again.

Becoming aware of that, I awoke faintly, perched on my throne–judging from the nuances, somehow or other it seems that this time, I starved to death.

Starvation, that's unusual.

I haven't been lacking for meals lately.

Was I bored with my systematic eating pattern, and got nostalgic for starvation?

"Have you awoken, Master?"

It was a reverent, astute, quite cool-headed voice, with a certain sharpness–turning to face it, I found Tropicalesque kneeling before the throne.

It seemed that while I'd starved to death and gotten mummified, he'd been posed with his face down all that time, until I'd woken up–must have been quite a pain.

He'd keep that posture until I released him–that momentarily struck my mischievous heart as amusing, but thinking that I'd never leave my throne if he kept sitting there,

"Show me your face."

I told him.

As if doing so was too great an honor, Tropicalesque shook his body, and raised up his face–

glancing down at him, I remembered, "Ah, right, this is how my foremost servant looks."

If I can savor this feeling afresh every time I come back to life, dying isn't all that bad.

Dying is almost like a special power for vampires anyway.

Well, at least, it's nothing to make a fuss over.

However, I could surmise quite some relief in worry-prone Tropicalesque's face as he looked up at me, practically overflowing with feelings of loyalty.

Tropicalesque Home-A-Wave Dog-Strings.

I called him my foremost servant, but's more accurate to call him my only servant–a long time ago there were more, but now, he's the last servant I have.

He moved up the ranks, and became number one.

And nobody succeeded him–nobody was left.

I don't think it's too lonely; and while I don't know about long ago, now that I've mastered my strength and my immortality, I don't even have a need for servants anymore–but since Tropicalesque has a nice face, I've decided to keep him by my side for the time being.

Not like he's a nuisance, anyway.

Well, it's not just because he has a nice face; he works hard and diligently manages Corpse Castle by himself, and honestly, because he's here, I can pass my days in comfort.

Although, while he's had the temperament of a hard worker from the start, you can't really say that Tropicalesque's improved appearance was own achievement–really, it'd be much easier to call it my achievement.

At any rate, he's a former human, whom I turned by drinking his blood–having one's bodily flesh optimized is a natural part of becoming a vampire. Of course, since there's also the question of the raw materials, I have no intention to loudly insist that it was all due to my

influence, but there's no doubt that he inherited those shining golden eyes and golden hair from me.

"If this is the most you are able to awaken, I believe you ought to eat me, Master."

Said Tropicalesque.

Really, this man is the embodiment of loyalty.

You could say that it's exceedingly natural for a servant, but for him to have been the only surviving servant due to that loyalty, he really is a different sort of vampire.

Unusual.

Even more unusual than starvation.

It's unusual, but it's not interesting.

Not enough to be of value.

I like the ones who turn on me more–although, since I'd eaten them as soon as they turned on me, they'd all disappeared one by one.

Conversely, Tropicalesque seemed to want me to eat him; but for now, I'll treat him as emergency rations at best.

And somehow or other, this time, it appears I might need to eat my emergency rations–did something happen?

I can never remember the circumstances of my deaths. So, hearing about it from Tropicalesque wasn't my daily routine, but something I could call my 'death routine'.

Part of the resurrection ritual, as it were.

"I am truly sorry. My investigation into the cause took quite some time. So I do not think there is another way; you should eat me, Master."

So, he tries to get eaten at every opportunity.

I've just come back to life, so I'm not even that hungry.

"The reason you passed away this time, Master, is a shortage of food–for me to have noticed so late is altogether the height of failure, but it appears that the humans in the kingdom have been wiped out."

"The humans in the kingdom, wiped out?"

Me of all people, at a loss.

All at once, I couldn't follow what Tropicalesque was saying, but I can't say that it didn't bring any vague memories to mind–memories of getting hungry and going out to eat, but getting puzzled at the lack of humans.

Nothing to eat.

Memories of being hungry and thirsty–of drying up.

"Did a war happen that we didn't notice?"

"It isn't quite like that."

Tropicalesque denied, looking quite regretful.

Looks like it pains his very heart to contradict me–well, setting that extreme sense of loyalty aside, he's right.

I hadn't fully regained my senses after waking up, but I'd said something idiotic–it's normal for the humans to have wars, but even if this kingdom had lost a war, people from other countries would start pouring into the empty space.

Nevertheless, for it to be such an extinction as to cause a food shortage for vampires… was it some kind of plague?

Had my foodstuffs been spoiled?

“A plague, yes, it can be called a plague.”

Tropicalesque quietly agreed.

As if being able to assent to my words was the greatest of pleasures, but he’d held it down.

“However, it is a plague called 'beauty.’”

“Hauh?”

“Master. Do you know the tale of 'Princess Beauty’?”

004

"Demons and evil spirits cannot exist without humans who tremble in fear of their existence."

"A woman so beautiful as to bring a nation to its knees"–I knew of such an expression, but if I were to adapt it for the "Princess Beauty" in Tropicalesque's story, I'd say she was a woman so beautiful as to bring a nation to its end.(1)

The princess who destroyed a country with her beauty alone.

The genocidal princess.

It was an interesting fairy tale.

Well, actually, what was amusing was watching Tropicalesque tell such a foolish story with a serious face; but even bearing that in mind, it piqued my interest.

Well, it piqued my appetite.

I couldn't help but lick my lips.

"So, you're saying that this princess destroyed her country, left her country, and she's finally wandered into our kingdom–and that's why the country was destroyed?"

"Yes."

Tropicalesque said, making a humble face.

So humble it could make me laugh.

"It appears that the whole nation, including the royal family and the nobles, gladly sacrificed their lives to 'Princess Beauty'–by scrambling to offer up their single most precious belonging, they hoped to recompense her beauty."

“But to destroy a country just from being there, just what kind of monster is this woman?”

I said, poking fun.

“She is a human, not a monster.”

He replied, looking as serious as ever–at least go along with it when your master is joking around, man.

This is why you’ll always be emergency rations.

“She is a human woman–and thus far, she appears to have destroyed a great number of countries–simply by passing through on a journey.”

“I see why you could call it a plague.”

A plague of extreme proportions.

Vampires are often compared to plagues too, but she appeared to be the very thing–well, you could say that humans’ driven pursuit of beauty is also a kind of plague.

Might be an incurable disease.

There have been countless humans who, at the culmination of their pursuit of an optimized appearance, asked me to drink their blood of their own volition–well, in most cases, I ended up eating them regardless.

In any case, just like the desire for immortal youth, it’s in humans’ nature to pursue beauty of the body. It might even be their karma.

“Alright, I’ve decided, Tropicalesque. This time, my first meal after waking up will be that princess–for my first meal in a long while, it surely won’t disappoint.”

“Er… M-Master, that’s…”

Tropicalesque broke his kneeling posture for the first time, and stood up, flustered–this man, who never loses his composure at anything, purturbed; it was quite pleasant to see.

Pleasant enough that I thought I might even eat one of his arms–no, still, the first thing I'll eat will be that "Princess Beauty".

It'll be my obsession.

The first thing I eat on an empty stomach ought to be a special foodstuff–there's no need to be moderate when breaking a fast.

Overeating is fine when it's a midnight snack, but more consideration is due for your first meal after waking up.

Well, since I'm a vampire, breakfast is a midnight snack.

That was a joke in consideration of the fact that Tropicalesque was formerly a human, but the stuffy old vampire didn't so much as smile (or maybe he's just the wrong audience).

"If I may presume to say, Master, would it not be better to stop now…"

With that, he began his report.

With all due respect, with all due regret.

Going down on his knees.

"Please, rethink this decision. I beg of you."

"Why, Tropicalesque. Are you telling me to starve all over again? There's no guarantee I'll come back to life next time–even less so, if the humans of the kingdom have been wiped out."

I'm a vampire, and as a vampire, of course I live by feeding on humans, but vampires can only exist where humans exist–I don't mean that with regard to food and nutrients;

demons and evil spirits cannot exist without humans who tremble in fear of their existence.

Because there's a crowd of humans who are afraid of me (or who worship me), I'm able to reign from my throne like this–same as how a kingdom can't exist without its subjects.

"Bu, but, as I reported before, there are much more fearsome monsters than this half-baked–"

"Tropicalesque, mine manservant. Are you concerned that I'll fall victim to that woman? That just like the humans, I'll adore this princess so much that I'll give up my life?"

"Tha, that is out of the question."

Tropicalesque said, prostrating himself–I'd rather he just kneel; even though he's my servant, I wanted to scold him harshly for making such a disgraceful pose. If he shrunk down any further, he could sink into the floor.

That'd be a bother even to his master.

Out of line.

Although, even for a slave it was no ordinary pose; it was almost as if Tropicalesque was lying down on the floor.

"In, in that case, could you not partake of the surrounding corpses to restore your strength, Master? That is how I have managed in this emergency."

He said.

It's almost like he was ignoring my desire to eat something special as my first meal on an empty stomach (the surrounding corpses, really?); but I'm sure Tropicalesque had intended to find a point of common ground.

I don’t mind that manner of cleverness.

He’s something of a dependable manservant.

But nevertheless, I can’t compromise.

It’s a different question.

It’s a question of food supply.

Whether you’re a human or a vampire, eating habits aren’t something you can change that easily.

“Listen, Tropicalesque. However you supply your nutrition is your own decision. I don’t force my way onto you, nor do I intend to–so keep out of my business.”

Eat as many corpses and cadavers as you please–but that’s your choice, not mine.

So I said.

“I only eat humans I’ve killed myself.”

005

"If you ask me, that's the secret to longevity."

I eat what I kill.

That's my rule.

As a vampire, and as a gourmand.

It's an uncrossable line.

It's especially true with regard to humans, but it also holds with non-human creatures–and, conversely, I want to eat as little food as possible that I haven't killed myself.

It's even rough to drink water.

Of course, it's difficult to be quite so thorough applying my rules, but the only liquid I want to intake is the liquid that pours out of veins. According to the faithful and humble Tropicalesque, he'd never heard of such an unbalanced diet, and I'm even treated as a heretic by fellow vampires.

I've been advised by certain know-it-alls that I won't live a long life with my eating habits–but then again, not a single one of those fellow vampires was still alive now.

I taught them what happens if you try to give advice to someone like me–obviously, I ate them too.

I eat what I kill. And if I kill it, I eat it.

After I kill it, no matter how disgusting or toxic, I always eat it–I eat it all, leaving nothing behind. That's my rule, and I accept no exceptions.

So, eating the corpses of the country's citizens who'd wiped themselves out, spellbound by the beauty of "Princess

Beauty", is hardly an option–no matter how good they taste.

I won't eat them.

I didn't kill them myself, so I won't eat them.

Well, I hardly intend to criticize Tropicalesque for surviving until my resurrection by eating corpses–he may be my servant, but there's no need for him to eat from the same menu as me.

Eat what you like, how you like.

If you ask me, that's the secret to longevity.

That's how it ought to be.

My stomach's in the mood for some Princess Beauty, so I'll eat Princess Beauty–I'll kill this woman so beautiful as to destroy a country, and eat her.

Eat how you like, eat what you kill.

I made my decision.

I do what I've decided to do in the way I've decided to do it.

From another view, you don't know when a dangerous woman like that will get killed, so I better kill and eat her soon.

I could miss out on my meal.

And so, I stood up from my throne–since Tropicalesque stubbornly refused to move from his prostrated position, I had no choice but to walk over his back to exit the castle.

"Don't follow me, mine attendant. There's no need for you to know where I'm going. I'm about to go looking for food, so my meal has already begun."

As I gave the order, it appeared Tropicalesque took great delight in being trampled upon by my feet.

I take my meals alone. That's also a rule of mine.

Technically, I'm with my food, so I'm not alone.

Well, it's not a rule that I have to comply with quite that strictly.

It's a convenient rule for when I want to be alone.

"Understood. Your humble servant awaits your return–please be careful. Take care, Master."

"Ah… right. Stop using an ordinary title like Master for me–it took me a while to notice after I woke up, but I have no memory of allowing you to use such commonplace name."

I said, without looking back.

"I, I'm so very sorry!"

It sounded like Tropicalesque had dropped to the floor.

As if reluctant to correct himself, Tropicalesque bade me farewell once again–calling to me with a more appropriate name.

"Take care, Suicide-Master. The death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicide-Master."(1)

"That's good."

I feel good just from hearing it.

Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicide-Master–only a name as cool and tough as that befits how cool and tough I am.

006

"Makes my heart flutter."

I'm not the one who named this castle of mine "Corpse Castle".

I mean, that'd be a little too much, even for me.

But even so, I am connected to the history in a sense–the name originates from a time long ago, when one of this country's kings ruled here as a despotic tyrant.

As he piled up mountains of corpses from within the country and without, he became known as

"the Corpse King", and thus the castle in which he lived became "Corpse Castle".

Well, because it had a bad history, the next generation of kings built a new castle elsewhere, and relocated their families and retinues over there–considering how much taxation would have been required to execute such a migration, I can't help but feel it's a bit paradoxical why the country didn't collapse; but, anyway, that's how I settled down in this empty, abandoned castle with its dark history.

Actually, it's more accurate to say that I "hatched" as a monster inside the empty Corpse Castle–the deep resentment and hatred of the humans who killed the Corpse King gave birth to a little vampire.

The legend was born.

From the dark history of this abandoned castle, my dark legend was born.

To counterbalance the scale with the vast number of people that foolish king

massacred, a monstrous apparition was created; indeed, that story would likely explain how powerful I am–

that's why I'm fond of that interpretation.

I don't know whether that's how it really happened, though.

Nobody can truly speak to the reason they were born, right?

The only certain points are that long ago, there was someone called the "Corpse King", and his castle was called "Corpse Castle".

But spread around the outside of this castle was a sight not even the Corpse King could have imagined in his life.

Corpses, corpses, corpses.

Generally speaking, people were dead.

Everyone in the kingdom was dead.

There'd been a lot of dying. They'd run out of people to die.

Of course, the scene was just like Tropicalese had reported, but this superb sight had far and way surpassed what I'd imagined. The land was in such a state that there was no place to walk; I had to use my wings to move around.

Looking down from the sky, the view was even more superb.

An unimaginably superb sight.

Time had passed since the reign of the Corpse King, and under the current king this ought to have been a rather peaceful kingdom (except for the fact that a monster like me lived here, of course)–but that idyllic image had been overturned at its foundations.

Now, far from being peaceful, it's full of nothing but death.(1) The mountains of

corpses seemed to require a redrawing of the map.

Wishing for the authenticity of a fairy tale isn't sane, and since I'd thought worry-prone Tropicalesque was just exaggerating, I'd taken care not to expect too much based on his frivolous report, but… now that I'm witnessing the situation, I think there might really be a certain amount of truth to the "Princess Beauty" fairy tale–Corpse Castle, huh; she'd really amassed a castle of corpses here.

Makes my heart flutter.

It would be hard to forgive her for magnificently spoiling all of this potential food that I might have eaten at some point (making me starve to death, but… well, since that was due to our carelessness, I suppose I ought to overlook it), but if she's endowed with the beauty to match this spectacle, it must be really something to eat her.

When it comes to food, quantity isn't quality.(2)

Anyway, this kingdom, once dominated by a "Corpse King", had been destroyed by a

"Princess Beauty". The kingdom had been proud of the size of its territory, even its mountains and ponds, so no matter how much I insist my meal starts when I go out looking for food, I'd thought that finding a single human in this vast area of land would be somewhat backbreaking work–then again, there were broken backs and stiff cartilage as far as the eye could see.(3) Looking down from my bird's-eye view, I could clearly judge my path by looking at the corpses–you might call it navigation, that is to say, I headed in

the direction where the number of corpses was increasing.

If I follow the direction where the odor of death is thickest, I'll reach "Princess Beauty"–that odor showed the route to her whereabouts even clearer than footprints.

The corpses multiplied.

Long ago, I'd been described as "after passing through, not a single blade of grass grew", but it appeared this princess was endowed with a beauty as could not be expressed with such a commonplace idiom–I'm looking forward to this.

After all, beauty is an important component in taste.

Even humans determine what animals and fish and such they'll eat on the merits of their appearance, right? How large it is, how it's shaped, the luster of its skin, how fleshy it is.

There's also the freshness factor.

This beauty who destroyed a country–er, far from it; this beauty who destroyed multiple countries would have an intense taste, surely. Now that I've seen this, it's hard to control my expectations.

And so, looking down from the sky, I proceeded using the corpses as guideposts. Oddly enough, the destination I arrived at was far from beautiful–it was a worn-out, dilapidated shack.

It was practically hidden in the shadow of the corpses, or rather, buried in the corpses, so I nearly overlooked it–it seemed as though the journeying princess was staying in this shack, but hm, could that be true? If I were her, I wouldn't even want to shelter from rain

in such a shabby building–it looked like it'd shatter in a gust of wind.

It felt more like a ruin than a building.

It was in such a state that I could more readily understand it as a bunch of firewood which, caught up in a whirlwind, happened to settle in the shape of a house–however, there were certainly signs of a human inside.

I don't intend to assert something occultish like, 'I can hear my food's voice because I'm a vampire', but I'm the type with good intuition like that.

Instinct–no, there's no need to dress it up, it's just my regular appetite.

Thinking about how I'd serve up the princess once I was inside the shack–maybe try the spare ribs first–I landed, and softly opened the door (-like wooden board).

I didn't decide the rule that vampires can't enter rooms without permission, so I don't follow it.

There's no need for permission to enter such a worn-out building in the first place, I suppose.

Actually, thinking of the risk of cave-ins, shouldn't it more off-limits to humans than vampires?

I'd started to doubt my intuition as to whether my food was really inside, but it turned out there was no need for a full-blown house hunt; I found the human I was hunting right away.

On the dirt floor.

Bubbling and simmering a pot on the blazing hearth.

Wearing an apron over modest Western clothes, cooking for herself; she didn't seem princess-like, but…

There were no words for the beauty of that face in profile.(4) It made my tongue ache anyway.

007

"A tasty name."

Somehow or other, it seems I died again.

As soon as I opened my eyes, she was there.

I was looking at her face.

I'd collapsed on the dirt floor, and of all things, she'd propped my head on her lap like a pillow–

this woman so beautiful as to destroy a nation.

Golden hair–I couldn't deny that it shone more brightly than my own.

A silver right eye, and a bronze left eye.

Looking from the front (or in this case, looking up from underneath), the beauty of that face was even more apparent–well, that's certainly true of the quality of its features, but the courage to place my head on her lap was just inexpressibly beautiful.

Why? Because just a short while ago, I was dead–it takes some nerve to use your lap as a pillow for an unknown corpse.

"Are you all right?"

Even that inquiring voice was nothing short of gentle.

A tone of voice I'd not once emitted myself.

"……"

Since I derived no particular pleasure from using the lap of a beautiful women as a pillow, I abruptly sat up–then, scratching my freshly revived, muddled head, I asked the princess,

"About how long was I dead?"

I really was muddled.

I shouldn't have asked how long I'd been dead, but rather how I'd died–starvation again? No, this sensation of resurrection felt like my body had been reformed after being smashed to smithereens.

Who attacked me, and how?

There's no way this slender princess was the one who attacked me, but–

"You were only dead for a very short time. And your death was by your own hand."

As if she'd grasped the intent of my question without even being asked, Princess Beauty answered.

But, I don't get it.

I did it?

"You committed suicide after attempting to kill me."

I don't get it one bit.

What's she talking about?

Seeing my obviously puzzled reaction, Princess Beauty continued.

"As for why you are trying to kill me…, I surmise that you must have your own reasons for doing so, but please reconsider. Please do not waste the life that was just returned to you at great cost."

She was still speaking cryptically as far as I was concerned, but strangely enough, I could see that this woman wasn't lying to me.

If she's saying so, there's no doubt I killed myself–I don't remember it very well, but I'm sure that as soon as I discovered Princess Beauty, I'd tried to hunt and eat her immediately.

Self-sufficiency.

I eat what I kill.

I shouldn't feel very hungry so soon after coming back to life, but getting greedy like that is certainly an impulse of vampires like me… however, those offensive abilities of mine came right back at me.

Blown to smithereens.

All in all, I minced myself up.

"Ka ka!"

I laughed.

I wonder how many years it's been since I laughed that loudly.

"So you're saying, basically–I couldn't allow myself to harm that beauty of yours, and without even hesitating to commit such a violent act, I tried to kill myself?"

"That is correct."

So assenting, the princess stood up nonchalantly, and headed toward the hearth–as if to say that attending to the pot on the fire was more important than being with me.

"Hey. I'm a monster, you know."

"So I gathered."

"I'm a vampire."

"Is that so? They really exist, then…"

"I'm a monster who kills people and eats them."

"So that is the reason for your behavior, then. We very sorry that we could not be of service."

"……"

"What is it?"

"……"

"If you are hungry, would you like to join me? The pot-au-feu is just about done."(1) As she spoke, the princess removed the pot from the hearth with both hands, and started to head deeper into the shack.

"I only eat creatures I've killed myself."

After making such a clear declaration to a foodstuff that had just invited me to eat, I contemplated that it probably wasn't a line I ought to say to food I'd failed to kill in the first place.

To me, spouting uncool lines like that is a terrible sin–of course, not enough to make me succumb to suicide again.

It's not like I was atoning for that sin, but nevertheless, I followed the princess as she went deeper into the shack. (Is it even possible to atone for the sin of destroying a whole country?) I'll partake of the meal (though I won't eat anything).

Seeing me following, she asked, "Might we inquire as to your name?"

There are quite a few vampires with a policy like, "I have no need to give my name to the likes of a human," but since I don't dislike using my name, I'll answer.

A boast of a name.

If it's not a boast, it's a lie.

"I'm the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire–Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicide-Master."

"My lord Suicide-Master, then?"

"No 'lord'. The name by itself is honorific enough. No matter what I call myself, don't use any titles with me."(2)

"I understand."

Setting the pot on a block of wood that could possibly have been a table, inside what might, by some chance, be a dining room, she gave me her name.

"I am Acerola."

Grasping the edge of her skirts, she bowed elegantly–it was a refined gesture, which almost charmed me in my coarseness, but setting that aside… Acerola?

"It's not 'Princess Beauty'?"

"That is a term of ridicule, not one of honor, that we were called as a child. Anyone who used that name has passed away."

Passed away.

That means, they all gave up their lives for Princess Beauty, right? In that case, it seems that Tropicalesque's information was a bit outdated.

Acerola, huh.

A tasty name.

"Is Acerola your first name? Or your family name?"

"It is neither. I no longer have the right to bear the name of my family–now, I cannot even use the name my father gave me, Laura."

"……"

According to the fairy tale, the princess' family were the first to encounter their daughter's beauty, and the first to die.

I don't know how much truth there is in that fairy tale, but… well, I'm certainly glad I can get by without calling her a pretentious name like "Princess Beauty".

"In that case, I'll call you Princess Acerola, then."

"As you wish. …Though, I was never a true princess to begin with."

Why has it come to this?–she said with a trace of sorrow, gently tilting her head to one side.

Those innocent gestures endlessly aroused my appetite, and I instinctively drew my claws and–

008

"I'm immortal, but it's because I'm immortal that it's a life-or-death problem."

Somehow or other, it appears I've died again.

Even in my long vampirical life–and, of course, my dietary life–I'd never been killed twice in succession in such a short period, and by the same opponent, too. Although, according to the opponent in question, I simply died of my own accord; it's not like Princess Acerola did anything herself.

The first thing I felt after coming back to life was the thumping of my still-beating heart, which I was clutching in my right hand–it appears that this time, I gouged out my heart.

The heart inside my chest already seemed to be restored.

Hmph.

I guess I've gotten used to this–looking at my own heart.

Just like a human biting into an apple, I sank my fangs into my heart–"if I kill it, I eat it" is an ironclad rule.

There's not much I can do when I get blown to smithereens, but the rule still holds even if I'm the target myself.

Gulp, gulp.

Ooh, juicy.

As expected of my own heart.

Lively food's the best–even if it's dead.(1)

"Are you immortal? I see. Quite marvelous, Suicide-Master."

Said Princess Acerola, eating her handmade pot-au-feu. It seemed like heartfelt admiration.

As she knew now that I was a vampire, she wasn't showing as much concern as before, when she'd laid my head on her lap–I felt a little disappointed at that… but would that mean I'm falling captive to her beauty like I'd said?

"Receiving such praise is the utmost of honors, Princess Acerola… So, did I turn against myself again, trying to eat you?"

"Indeed, that is correct. But please, do not worry, Suicide-Master. It is the fault of my excessive beauty."

That line didn't sound like some arrogant boast, but rather that Princess Acerola felt genuinely responsible for my two deaths.

No need for her to feel responsible.

The beauty of that disposition of hers would break nearby hearts even further–if I'm careless too, I'll fret over making the princess feel that way, and I fear I might commit suicide again.

Just how many people has this woman seen die like that?

"It appears I have caused a great deal of trouble to this country as well."

Trouble, huh.

You destroyed it, so thoroughly as to make a vampire starve to death.

The woman so beautiful as to destroy a nation.

"I beg your pardon; I will be taking my leave soon. It appears the person for whom I am searching is not in this country either."

"……?"

She's searching for someone?

I doubt she's searching for someone to eat… but what, she's looking for someone?

Ah, come to think of it, was that also in the fairy tale?

A wandering journey to find someone who can save her–right, that's what happened in Princess Beauty's fairy tale.

But more importantly… taking her leave?

Hey, hey.

No way I can pardon that.

"Selfish, that is."

I said.

I really couldn't tolerate her going to another country, so the line came from my heart, but I wasn't trying to start an argument–far from it, as a vampire, I was downright embarrassed to say something so virtuous.

"How many corpses do you intend to make in order to search for someone who can save you?

How many countries will you destroy just to save yourself?"

"Are you telling me to die?"

I thought she'd get a bit agitated, but contrary to my expectations, Princess Acerola replied with quiet composure–as if any conflict was already settled.

I'm not telling her to kill herself, though.

After all, if I want to eat something, I kill it myself.

"If I could die…, if I were able to end my own life, that might be easier. However, if the same problem occurs again someday, if there were someone in my circumstance who must

take their own life, there would be nobody to save them."

"……"

I'm getting mixed up. I don't really get what she's saying–choosing death because things are painful and cruel is just running away, is that what she's thinking?

Hah, how very righteous.

But that overly beautiful righteousness is a poison to the weak–that righteousness had slaughtered all those nations and all their peoples.

Death by poison.

Death by the poison of beauty.

A witch's curse.

But at this point, she's become something as fearful as a witch herself–well, whatever goals she has and whatever lifestyle she chooses, that's just an issue of individual preference, and it has nothing to do with me.

But I couldn't tell her that.

Whether they're human or vampire, it's my policy not to stick my value system down other peoples' throats (the only thing going in her throat is the soup). However, her goal, and the way she lives trying to achieve it, are directly harmful to me.

I'm not just being short-sighted because I keep committing suicide trying to eat Princess Acerola.

If she continues her journey trying to save herself and the future, in the worst case, it could lead to the collapse of humanity–considering her lack of awareness of the fact that she's killing the present in order to save the future, there's a remarkably high probability of such a disastrous conclusion.

I'm a monster.

An oddity, a monster, a vampire.

What becomes of the likes of humans is of no concern to me–that's not what I'm saying. It's a life-or-death problem.

I'm immortal, but it's because I'm immortal that it's a life-or-death problem.

I've already encountered a food shortage and starved to death because the kingdom was wiped out. Actually, I'm the one with a more pressing need to go on a journey–but if I go looking for food and all I find is slaughter wherever I go, I'll miss out on meals at the very least.

The problem of Princess Acerola's beauty was certainly not a trivial one to me.(2) It's simply a problem of food supply.

If humans go extinct, monsters also go extinct.

It's the food chain.

A chain of extinction–concatenating.

I can't let this go.

……But, having said that, what should I do?

If I eat this princess right here, all those problems would be solved, but since I can't do that, I've fallen into quite the difficult paradox–no, think calmly.

I don't like thinking, but this is no time to be allowing for likes and dislikes.

So, having thought about it, I, the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicide-Master, found an unexpected mutual interest with Princess Acerola, a.k.a. Princess Beauty.

Princess Acerola doesn't want to kill people, and I want to kill people. Princess Acerola finds it painful to keep on living, and

I find it painful not being able to eat Princess Acerola.

How about that, aren't the supply and demand just perfect for each other? I ought to take advantage of that.

I ought to set about preparing the meal.

I've failed twice to devour her. I've killed myself twice.

"Hey, Princess Acerola."

I called out.

Unusually for me, I'm being cautious.

Until now, I'd intended to trick her, but it'd be unwise to try to deceive her with ill intent.

Ill intent would be repulsed back at me.

With the urge to mutilate and injure myself.

So I have to aim for a mutual understanding, thoroughly satisfying the princess' desires–what a complicated cooking procedure this is turning out to be.

"Do you have any prospects? When you leave this country that you destroyed, as usual, do you think there'll be someone who can save you in the next country you visit? That you won't just repeat the same thing all over again in the next country?"

"It seems you have misunderstood; I do not destroy every country in my path. I see to it, to the best of my ability, to the extent that I am able, that such a thing does not happen."

"But there's a limit. You're not actually able to do it. I can't deny your purpose–or rather, your aesthetic purpose, but I can only warn you that continuing your journey so thoughtlessly is ill-advised."

A warning.

That I'd have to give that which I hate most of all to receive…

There's a limit to how out-of-character I can get.

"That is true…"

However, Princess Acerola did not refuse the monster's warning, and accepted it sincerely.

Such honesty.

A human might succumb to guilt and choose suicide at the very moment they witnessed the princess' current manner, but since I'm a vampire, I got through safely, just barely.

"Even if you say it is ill-advised, I do not know another way. Unless I continue wandering, I will not reach an answer."

"No, that's not right."

I said.

Here it comes.

"Listen, Princess Acerola. Even if you didn't want to, you destroyed this kingdom–that's over and done, so I'm not telling you to fret over it, but there's nothing you can do. It's the unshakable, unalterable truth. But you can put this situation to good use."

"Put it–to good use…"

"If you don't hurry off in a panic, as long as you remain in this kingdom, this dead kingdom, you don't need to worry about killing anyone."

Well, it's not a lie; whether she's worried about killing or not, there aren't any more humans left to kill.

That's within the safe range to say.

"What are you saying? I am worried about killing you, Suicide-Master. I cannot remain

here while you are trying to eat me–I will end up killing you again."

She's deadly serious.

Not because she doesn't want to get eaten, but because she doesn't want me to kill myself trying to eat her–should I say she's soft-hearted? Or is that simply her beauty?

But it's still a needless worry.

There's nothing to worry about.

"I'm an immortal monster, you know. The death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicide-Master. Dying is nothing to me. Listen, princess. Let me tell you, there's nobody else like me–even I stay close to you, I'll keep coming back to life no matter how much I die. I'm the one thing in existence you can consult with."

"Consult?"

Despite the keen intelligence of "Princess Beauty", she looked surprised, as if it were a completely unexpected proposal.

"Yes. I'm every bit the monster you see now, but there's more to me than meets the eye–I even have a small knowledge of sorcery. It's part of being supernatural, you know? So, I should be able to help you come up with a way to unravel the witch's curse–how about that?"

"……"

In other words.

After pondering for a little while, Princess Acerola stared straight at me.

That intense gaze could certainly not be described as the frailness of a tragic princess–even if she weren't cursed by a

witch, if I'm not careful, I might end up exterminated anyway.

"Does that mean, in exchange for receiving your help, you will detain me in your territory, and look for a chance to eat me?"

Correct answer.

A bit more accurately, if I could contrive to handle her beauty somehow, or at least weaken it so that she doesn't wipe out all of humanity, I'm sure I could eat her too.

Like, removing the poison from a blowfish, so to speak.(3) Matching our mutual interests.

It's far from perfect.

But is there anything else we could agree on?

If Princess Acerola accomplishes her goal, my desire to eat her will be fulfilled at the same time–humanity won't have any more of its nations destroyed, and it's nobody's loss.

For someone who hates thinking, I've cobbled up quite an excellent recipe on the fly, haven't I?

"You have me. It seems there is nothing for it but to join hands with you, Suicide-Master."

Princess Acerola said, sighing deeply.

Even that melancholic act was beautiful.

No, what was more beautiful was the strength of her determination, to join hands even with a monster like me for the sake of her purpose.

Or perhaps, she thought that refusing the only half-baked proposal I could devise might make me take my own life again; maybe I ought to say that compassion itself was the most beautiful.

Well, it's all good.

If I can eat what I kill, it's all good.

If can just follow that rule, generally speaking, nothing else matters.

"Well, I look forward to working together."

Princess Acerola extended her right hand to me; she really did, that wasn't a metaphor.

Depending on the type, there's a possibility of energy drain through vampires' hands–so it must have taken a tremendous amount of courage.

When she'd laid my head on her lap like a pillow, all I could think about was eating her thighs first, but now I want to start with the breast meat.(4)

Handshakes aren't a custom of this kingdom, but for the time being, we'll be partners working together to solve our problems, so I might as well match her at least this much.

I grasped Princess Acerola's right hand.

It was the first time I directly touched her skin, her meat, without being blocked by clothes–

what a sensation; I could just dig into that tenderness.

I lost control of myself, and then…

009

"It's not like I invited the princess to some kind of dinner party at the castle–rather, I invited her to be on the menu for a dinner party."

Somehow or other, it appears I've died again.

Essentially, I, the vampire spoken of in legends, met Princess Acerola, the "Princess Beauty"

spoken of in fairy tales, and just after we finalized our deal, I died for a third time.

What a terrible lunch meeting this is (even if it's night-time).

Well, in any case, we certainly settled some joyous, productive negotiations, so it ought to be seen as a success–if those three deaths of mine weren't useless, then I didn't die a dog's death, in vain.

If I had to say, it might've been a demon's death.

I died like a demon.

And so, I invited Princess Acerola to Corpse Castle–even if it's temporary, we've built a cooperative relationship, so it'd be a bother if she's not by my side. I don't want to stay one second longer in this shack, and there'd be no point in continuing to store such a valuable foodstuff in a place like this.

Even "Princess Beauty", who boasted what could only be called impregnable defenses against any attacks of malice and hostility, didn't have a means of defending herself from the caving-in of an old, decaying building.

Against a natural phenomenon, she'd be at her wits' end.

As a wanderer, it seemed Princess Acerola made it a principle to live simply and frugally, so while it was only temporary, she was about to firmly decline my offer with a, "There's no way I can stay in a castle" (humbly, of course), but thinking of the unlikely possibility of there being survivors among the thousands of people she wiped out, I tried to persuade her that continuing to stay in this randomly chosen place might be dangerous.

Persuasive maneuvers.

I'm no good at this.

Innocent people are in danger, not just Princess Acerola; there's a possibility that people from other countries will cross the border after hearing rumors about "Princess Beauty"… anyway, despite my lack of skill, I rattled on like that–if you come with me, my Corpse Castle has a dark history, and people with ordinary sense won't try to approach, so for the time being there'd be no new victims.

Whether I was offering candid advice or employing sweet cajolery, well, I can't judge myself, but looking back on it now, I'd gotten very good at currying favor with my food.

Though, I'd rather my food taste good than feel good.

Of course, after narrowing down her options, Princess Acerola accepted my invitation–I wonder which one of us actually curried favor with the other.

It goes without saying that a vampire of such ill repute as myself might be supposed to forcefully kidnap this peerless beauty and

confine her in my castle–but she wasn't a peerless beauty so much as a destructive beauty, so there's no way I could do that. I could only try to carry out a kidnapping in its original meaning, by tempting her with deception.(1) That said, if I could see Princess Acerola's dumbfounded reaction to the massive size of Corpse Castle, I'd feel satisfied, or maybe I'd feel like things were going my way.

Having been exposed to the disgrace of dying three times in succession, if I don't show some dignity, we'll have difficulties in our relationship from now on.

I'm so amazing!

I own a castle!

However, it didn't appear as though Princess Acerola was entirely taken aback at the majesty of the castle.

"Oh my, do you live in such a large castle by yourself?"

That was her reaction.

Like she thought of me as quite a poor soul of a vampire.

Egad.

My lonely image has become cemented.

"No, not by myself. Me and my loyal servant live here together," I explained, almost like I was making an excuse–and while saying so, I remembered Tropicalesque, whom I'd completely forgotten.

It was embarrassing to return so dejectedly without having eaten at all after I'd leisurely left, declaring that my meal had begun, but I've got no choice but to put on airs in front of my slave.

"Ah. You have a housemate, then… In that case, should we not have sought approval from that person with regard to my stay here?"

Good grief, that brutality of hers. The way she considers every last concern is contradictory to her brutal beauty, isn't it– she even pays consideration to a vampire's slave.

I explained to her that my loyal servant would never express opposition to the decision of his master, and there's no problem with getting his approval after the fact.

"I am completely opposed. What are you thinking, Master? That you would invite a lowly human into the castle, I cannot believe it."

……He was strongly opposed.

Leaving Princess Acerola in the parlor for the time being, I returned to my throne and gave a simple explanation of the circumstances to Tropicalesque, who was in the middle of utilizing his powers and construction skills to repair the floor. As soon as I did, however, without kneeling or even waiting for me to sit down, my loyal servant repudiated my plan right to my face.

"Are you instructing me to look after not only you, Master, but an inferior human as well? That is too much."

"You were trying to look after me…?"

Quite the professional mentality.

Maybe that's a slave's willpower.

Seeing Tropicalesque look as if he might burst into tears, I was very nearly moved, but I barely managed to declare, "This has been

decided. I had no intention of asking your opinion. And don't call me commonplace names like Master."

"Tha, that was my mistake, Suicide-Master."

Remembering himself, Tropicalesque kneeled–however, he didn't lower his face, and gazed sternly at me.

It might be a slave's willpower, but it's quite the willpower indeed.

I'd sneered at that aspect of him–looking down on him.

I'd thought he was just a loyal idiot, but it seems I was wrong.

This was neither the time nor place for it, but I felt a bit happy to discover an unexpected new side to my servant, as late as it was.

"Don't worry. I don't intend to make you look after a human–or rather, actually, I wanted to warn you to stay away from Princess Acerola for now."

"Princess Acerola… you have committed to memory a lowly human's name, of all things, Suicide-Master?"

Said Tropicalesque in astonishment.

Just what do you think of your master's memory?

I can at least remember a proper noun.

Besides, for a former human yourself, you have the nerve to keep calling her a "lowly human"

without the slightest embarrassment?

Or perhaps.

It's because he's a former human that be has such a disgust for them.

Disgust for your own kind–disgust for your former kind?

Well, it's true that even a vampire like me was born from the hatred of humans, and I basically agree with him that humans are all inferior, for the most part.

There's no real need for me to go out of my way to distinguish between them individually.

But that woman is different.

Princess Acerola is–"Princess Beauty" is not an inferior human.

She's an exceptionally superior human, with exceptionally high-quality meat.

She merits remembering.

And that's why I have to warn Tropicalesque.

"I'm the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, so that princess's walls of defense are nothing to me, but a vampire like you will easily fall victim–the moment you see her, you'll get blown to pieces."

I'm the one who got blown to pieces the moment the moment I met her, and no matter how you look at it, saying it's "nothing to me" is too much of a pretension, but if I don't give him a

harsh warning here, he'd want to confirm with his own eyes that "Princess Beauty" was alluring enough to pass as a supernatural being.

"If, if that's the case, it's too late… it is too late, Suicide-Master. Putting a dangerous character like that in the castle… As the overseer of the management of this castle, I

cannot turn a blind eye to this state of affairs."

Sure he manages it, but did he intend to be its overseer? I guess if you build a relationship one-on-one, you'll discover quite a few new sides to a person.

In that regard, it might be worthwhile to cultivate this part of him.

"Stop grumbling, Tropicalesque. You're out of line. Have I ever reversed a decision I've made?"

"W-well, I believe you have…"

Hmph.

Is that so?

I suppose I have.

Having gone out resolving to eat the princess from the fairy tale, I came back accompanied by that princess, so there's no helping any doubts about my decisiveness and the strength of my convictions–but even so, I'd always intended to carry out my decisions to the best of my ability.

In my own capacity, in my own style.

And it's not like I invited the princess to some kind of dinner party at the castle–rather, I invited her to be on the menu for a dinner party.

It's more like I'm stocking up on food.

In that case, oughtn't the slave be applauding his master for being such a hard worker?

"Just like you said, it's quite a difficult food to prepare–I don't seem to be able to swallow her without any consideration. I've decided that I need to make some careful advance preparations in order to eat her. So don't

make that face. Of course I'll be the one to look after her."

"Ah, are you able to look after a foodstuff? What if I end up doing it…?"

"Of course I can do it."

I'd thought I sounded like a child asking permission from its parents to adopt a stray dog, but that might be an unexpectedly accurate comparison.

These situations do resemble each other.

The difference is that I view the human I'm taking in as food.

"I've decided that I can do it. I've decided. In other words, it's been decided. Therefore, there's no problem–my answer is that there shouldn't be any problem. What, I don't intend to make her stay here all that long. Just as long as it takes to break through the princess' walls of beauty and kill her–it won't take very long."

"…Understood."

After all, I won't know what's happening anyway–thus, quite reluctantly, even begrudgingly, maybe even bitterly, Tropicalesque finally gave his permission for "Princess Beauty" to stay in the castle.

Come to think of it, it was odd for me to seek permission from my subordinate when it was my castle, but even a master-slave relationship isn't quite so straightforward.

Anyway, my attempts thus far had been met with unexpected difficulties, but from now on is the real issue.

"So, Tropicalesque. I want to ask your opinion."

Having just declared that I had no intention of asking his opinion, I posed a question to my servant.

"How do you think 'Princess Beauty' can be killed?"

010

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. A curse for a curse."

I can say, with no fear of misunderstanding, that I had no plan.

No action to take, no plan to make.

I had no idea what to do about my meal.

At the time, I'd racked my brains to try to stop the princess' departure at any cost; although I'd eloquently persuaded her that she mustn't thoughtlessly head to another country, I was nearly as thoughtless as she was–not even; I was even more thoughtless than her.

I'd said we would come up with a way to unravel the witch's curse together, but it's not like I had a specific idea on how to do it.

I had no insight.

It certainly wasn't a lie to say that I had some knowledge of sorcery, but it really was on the level of "some"; there's no way I'd be able to unravel a curse or offset it with a different curse or something like that.

I'd made it a priority to store "Princess Beauty" in a cool, dark place like Corpse Castle to make preparations to eat her, but I didn't have the foggiest idea of how to proceed from hereon out.

Though, as a vampire, I naturally knew a thing or two about transformations and fog…

Let's see.

"So, I want to borrow your wisdom, Tropicalesque. As I recall, when you were human, you came from a line of sorcerers, correct?"

“That was a long time ago.”

Tropicalesque gave a curt, immediate answer to his master’s question–it wasn’t ill-tempered (well, it might’ve been), but it seems this dignified man hated remembering his time as a human from the bottom of his heart.

Well, there are all kinds of sorcerers, and it didn’t seem like this man was treated very well back then, so it’s not like I couldn’t understand his feelings (though I don’t think he could say he’s being treated very well now, either).

But this isn’t a time to be considering each and every one of our delicate sensitivities–I’m not as understanding a person as Princess Beauty.

All I understand is the difficulty of the task at hand.(1)

“Basically, her ‘beauty’ seems like a vampire’s 'charm’, doesn’t it?”

Putting on the facade of a vampire who was utterly indifferent to Tropicalesque’s feelings, I ventured my own interpretation.

Charm.

One of the typical vampire “abilities”, with which both Tropicalesque and I were endowed–as the first step in the creation of minions, it interferes with a human’s mind, almost like a kind of hypnotism; it bears some resemblence to the allure of Princess Beauty, in the sense that both involve bewitching people.

Its effectiveness depends on the mental fortitude of the target, but in any case, we can control it–we can turn it on and off.

So even though Princess Beauty couldn't seem to control her allure, I thought perhaps it could be controlled the same way as ours, and it could be turned on or off depending on how it's used; but Tropicalesque flatly rejected that idea.

"No, the two are completely different."

He's not hesitating to point out my mistakes anymore.

Good, good.

"In the first place, what Princess Beauty suffers from is not a curse."

"It's not a curse?"

"If anything, is it not a gift? She has been blessed."

Tropicalesque spoke as if he'd seen it himself–no matter how much he dislikes his memories as a human, child is the father of man, as they say.(2)

It seems he has a personal opinion on this topic.

"What do you mean, 'blessed'?"

"The beauty which enchants those around her is purely her own; there is neither magic nor sorcery about it–at most, the witch simply made that beauty visible to others."

"Hm. Made it visible, huh."

I agreed the way I usually do, but I didn't really get it.

Making beauty visible.

Inner beauty–must be.

In cooking terms, that'd be taste, right?

Not arrangement or decoration.

"In that case, couldn't we use magic to make her beauty invisible, then?"

Cancelling out the curse.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

A curse for a curse.

If it's actually a gift, then using a curse is all the more appropriate.

"That would be difficult, I believe. It may have been possible long ago, but now, any magic we use that bears a curse would be seen as an 'attack', and would most likely be reflected back upon the caster–nine times out of ten, I would say. Perfect defenses. Even if we attempted to

'charm' Princess Beauty, we would, of course, become charmed ourselves."

"…Which means, if I try to kill her and eat her, I'd be the one getting killed and eaten? Me?

Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicide-Master?"

I tried asking in a joking manner.

"That is very probable." Tropicalesque's answer was as serious as ever. "We can surmise that this situation is only possible because you have made it appear as though you and Princess Beauty have a mutual interest, Suicide-Master."

Tropicalesque emphasized the word "appear"–as if he wanted to say I was deceiving her.

"You are deceiving her."

He said it!

"I am filled with awe at my master's idea to invite Princess Beauty into the castle in the guise of nestling close to her desires, but if you fail even once from now on, your ill will toward Princess Beauty will start being returned back unto yourself."

"Well, I'm prepared for that."

I've already died three times.

It's too late to think of avoiding death.

Although, it's not ill will that got reflected back those three times, it's appetite.

"I will not dissent any further, Suicide-Master, but you ought to properly prepare before taking action. Prepare, I mean, your physical condition… I do not think this is a person to be dealt with on an empty stomach."

"I've already decided. The first thing I'll put in my empty stomach is that woman."

I don't need appetizers or aperitifs.

Strictly speaking, I did already eat my own heart, but that doesn't count in this case.

"…I understand. I will also begin researching whether there is a way–I would like to try investigating outside the realm of sorcery. As such, Master, I beg you, please, do not be hasty, and be cautious in your preparations."

"Ah, of course. No need to beg me. My name might be Suicide-Master, but it's not like I have any particular desire to die."

Despite reassuring Tropicalesque, I hastily threw myself at Princess Beauty twice more after that, and thereby lost my life two more times.

I don't besmirch the name of Suicide-Master.

011

"Pretend to be worse than you really are."

I'm not a particularly thoughtful vampire, but even I can understand when I've died five times.

Preparing this food is going to require more drastic measures.

I'd tried to be prudent, but because she'd aroused my appetite, I got impatient and ended up only thinking about ways to kill her–and I'd made absolutely no progress.

I've started to feel rather hungry.

It's difficult to stomach this predicament–especially with an empty stomach–but I need to change my whole mindset.(1)

Of course, I need to revolutionize my own way of thinking, but even more than that, I need some kind of coup d'etat against the princess herself.

I've got to get Princess Acerola to change.

I want to preserve the taste of the base material as best I can, but it needs seasoning–by adjusting the flavor, I can make it easier to eat.

Despite having reservations about an inferior human staying in the castle, my loyal servant Tropicalesque Home-A-Wave Dog-Strings has been out and about inquiring after a cooking

method (really, he's loyalty incarnate), but I can't simply wait for him to return–it's against my nature to leave everything up to my subordinate.

There are some foods which shouldn't be paired together.

…By the way, speaking of things against my nature, as I'd promised Tropicalesque, I'd single-handedly shouldered the responsibility of taking care of my foodstuff.

I procure human food, cook it in a human style, and deliver it to the room I prepared for her three times a day–setting aside morning and night, it's rather hellish to come out at midday when I'd ordinarily be sleeping, but I was able to endure by thinking of it as one step in the recipe.

Since I sleep in a coffin, I'd never once used any of the beds in the castle, but my responsibility even extended to making her bed.

I'm glad Tropicalesque is out and about.

Gallantly looking after a human is not something I can very well show my subordinate.

But I need to make my food comfortable.

It'd be bad if her flavor diminished due to the stress of being in an unfamiliar environment.

"We are more than able to see to our needs."

Of course, "Princess Beauty" was well-versed in that regard and had declined, but I don't know, something didn't quite sit right with me.

Maybe her upbringing was even better than I thought.

She certainly had the ability to support herself, but during her wandering journey after being driven out of her country (having destroyed it)–I have no doubt that the only reason a young woman could have come this

far alone is due to support from her surroundings.

The clothes she's wearing seem to be "tribute" from people she passed by–well, if she hadn't accepted them, they may have offered up their lives instead, so Princess Acerola wasn't in a position to refuse such meddling.

But at present, there wasn't a single person in this kingdom to offer her Western clothes, so that was also something I needed to prepare for her–the princess might not like it, since she made it a principle to live simply and frugally, but I'm the type to fuss over arranging my food.

I ordered a decisively gorgeous dress–although, it was pointless to order such a dress for someone who looks good in any kind of clothes.

Anyway, contrary to Tropicalesque's worries, I was doing a good job looking after my food.

Any kind of deficiency in how I handled her could quickly lead to my death (actually, I'd already died twice while looking after her), so it was relatively frightful breeding work.

But I have to do this no matter what.

Even if I'm immortal.

"And so, Princess Acerola, I'm going to change your mindset too."

"…In other words, you will alter my mentality in some way in order to eat me. Is that what you are saying, Suicide-Master? I understand," the princess assented.

Did she really understand?

I'd thought that this holder of great beauty, mercilessly slaughtering people wherever she goes, might have fallen into despair, but this woman certainly had more mental fortitude than that–on the contrary, you could even say that her toughness is what's made the problem as bad as it is.

There's a danger of her going bland.

"At this time, I believe I have attempted everything within my power–however, Suicide Master.

What precisely is involved in the act of changing one's mentality?"

"My loyal subordinate said so before; rather than calling your present circumstance the result of a witch's curse, it'd be more accurate to say it's the result of your own beauty. So, we should focus our efforts not on the witch's curse, but on that beauty of yours itself."

"…..?"

Due to her modest attitude, it was hard to say whether Princess Acerola was legitimately self-aware of her own "beauty" in the first place, and it didn't seem like what I was saying was getting through to her.

Or maybe it's just that I gave a poor explanation.

But I need her to understand.

I'll make her self-aware.

This recipe has some extremely complicated steps–it's on a completely different level than stepping on Tropicalesque's back.

"Essentially, Princess Acerola, I'm saying that to stop your beauty from charming

humans into sacrificing their most precious lives, you need to stop being beautiful."

"…Yet, that does not solve the problem, does it? It is not very different from the idea to give up on life and commit suicide."

She does speak frankly.

No fear whatsoever in front of a vampire.

Of course, she's right.

And that solution wasn't my true intention, either–if, as a result of changing her mindset, Princess Acerola could cast away her modest attitude and thoughtfulness and consideration, her nobility and innate goodness, and her sense of ethics… then there'd be no more slaughter.

People won't die.

She won't keep destroying nations.

However, I don't think that solution was what Princess Acerola desired, and it's not the solution I wanted either–a recipe like that wouldn't make full use of the raw material's flavor.

It'd end up changing the taste.

"Well, listen, Princess Acerola. There really isn't any need for you to renounce your beauty–all you have to do is pretend to. It's an issue of arrangement and decoration."

What comes next is critical.

"Pre–tend?"

"From what I hear, the cause of all this was that people were seduced by your outward beauty, and nobody focused on how you were on the inside, right? That's why you went to the witch–

who made it so nobody would be seduced by your appearance, but everyone got bewitched by your inner beauty instead. Isn't

that right? Of course, I'm not telling you to throw away your inner beauty."

It'd be impossible anyway, even if I told her to.

If she could do that, we'd have no trouble in the first place.

The only possibility, then, is an act performed since ancient times: changing one's mindset.

I couldn't control my appetite, and Princess Acerola couldn't control her purity and nobility–

that's alright, that's fine.

That itself is fine–but.

"But, even if you can't change how you are on the inside, you should be able to change your behavior."

"You speak of… behavior?"

"To put it simply, I'm talking about acting like a 'bad person'."

Pretending to be worse than you really are.

"Put an end to that elegant way of speaking, that graceful way of bearing yourself, right away–

it's not like you're changing the essence of your beauty, so it shouldn't be a problem."

"……"

Princess Acerola pressed her fingers to her lips in consideration.

She seemed deep in thought, but unrelenting, I pointed out, "That's no good."

"From now on, whenever you're thinking about something, do it with your arms crossed. Don't put your hand on your lips. But it's not like that changes what you're thinking

about, right? The gesture is different, but your thoughts don't change at all."

"A-arms crossed…?"

Princess Acerola looked confused, as if she'd never crossed her arms before–if I could have everything I wanted, I'd have her think by sitting cross-legged on chairs or throwing herself down on the bed, but I shouldn't aim that high right away.

Well, not that it's much to ask for in the first place.

Just gotta work steadily at what she's able to do.

"From now on, I'll prepare dresses with flashier designs for you too–and don't use cutlery for meals, eat with your bare hands."

"B-bare hands?"

Judging from her reaction, it seemed like she couldn't believe it–but trying to prevail upon her, I pressed her further. "Depending on your perspective, taking meals using just a sharp knife might be even more barbaric."

My persuasion is the only thing that's gone well.

Well, what's barbaric versus what isn't barbaric is a problem of the local culture, a problem of appearances–and I'm saying that appearance itself is the focal point.

A point so focal it'd make a grill mark.(2)

How she seems–how she sees.

"B-but, Suicide-Master. I–"

"Stop being so elegant when you talk. Whenever you use that majestic, royal style, imagine that a million people have died–from now on, talk like a normal person."

“N-normal? Ah… So my way of speaking ought to change as well… Creating phrases in a more arrogant, unpleasant way…”

Princess Acerola assented with an earnest look on her face.

If she’s coming up with ideas on her own, her understanding was faster than I’d expected.

That speed of understanding itself was an issue, and she shouldn’t make such a pensive face from now on, but again, I shouldn’t try to change all that right away–let’s first change what we’re able to.

Slow and steady, baby steps.

“I’m not telling you to become a bad person, and I’d think tainting you with evilness is completely impossible regardless. I’m not telling you to do anything you can’t do. So, pretend to be bad–to say it another way, you should become one of those 'actually a good person’.”

Her outer beauty could no longer obscure her inner beauty–that was the witch’s curse,

“Princess Beauty’s” gift.

So, if she renounces just her outer beauty, while still preserving that interior, we might be able to outwit the rule of curses and gifts by masking her inner beauty.

If I have to say.

It’s like wrapping something in paper to bake it.

Princess Acerola doesn’t have to kill any more people than she has.

And I can kill her.

…It’s all a hypothesis.

But it’s a hypothesis worth testing.

Worth verifying–I could call it tasting for poison.

It's possible we're doing something so amusing that we couldn't look at each other directly, but we're being deadly serious.

"I understand. Er, I get you."

With tremendous determination, Princess Acerola arched her back–it's probably the first time she made such a domineering pose in her life.

"From here on, I will endeavor, rather, I will try to behave and look as vulgar as possible. As I can. Suicide-Master, I'll follow your example!"

"……"

That last bit was rather uncalled for, but I recognize her effort–now that we've gotten here, it might be good to change that cute, elegant name of Princess Acerola as well.

It doesn't seem like she'll complain, so I ought to think up an appropriate name to put her on the menu–in front of the eager princess, in the faint light of hope I hadn't seen in a long time, that's what I thought.

012

"Maybe humans are able to live beautifully because their lifespans are short."

"As 'Princess Beauty' is afflicted with a curse so that people cannot be beguiled by her outward beauty, attempting to make her outwardly ugly is not so much paradoxical as it is somewhat ironic, is it not?"

I awoke to Tropicalesque's voice–having finished gathering information, he's returned to Corpse Castle for the first time in a while.

Somehow or other, it appears I've died again.

Seems to have been a light death by starvation.

There's nothing light or heavy about starvation, though.

Technically, I suppose I've become lighter because my stomach is empty-all I've eaten are pieces of my own body, so I've had an empty stomach for quite a long time now.

If I ate something now, I'd probably feel heavy regardless of what it was–though, that doesn't really matter.

"Suicide-Master?"

Judging from his curious tone, it would seem my loyal servant hasn't yet realized about my latest death–things would likely turn serious if he found out (he might try to force me to eat something), so I ignored it.

"Irony, huh." I joined in the conversation noncommittally. "That might be alright. Really, that princess's whole existence is a bit ironic."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

Tropicalesque leaned forward, as if overflowing with curiosity about his master's words.

Wanting to receive lessons from your master is commendable, but all I'd tried to do with that line was indicate I was listening to him–there's no "What do you mean?" about it; I didn't mean anything beyond what I'd said.

I'd just tried to say something.

But, it'd be hard to tell him that.

So, in order to hide both the fact that I'd died of hunger and that I was just being vague, I began elaborating–is this another matter of pretense, I wonder?

"Think about it. In humans' value systems, Princess Acerola ought to be absolute right, and you and I ought to be absolute evil, but she's slaughtered way more humans than we have; isn't that situation itself rather ironic in the first place? A certain irony of character. It's nearly satirical that the result of this woman pursuing her lofty ideals is the ruination of so many kingdoms."

"They say fish cannot live in water that is too pure… Although, it is my conjecture that the humans who sacrificed their lives to 'Princess Beauty' certainly did so with happiness and satisfaction."

Isn't that still ironic?

Well, it's the truth.

Even if Princess Acerola fretted, grieved and moaned, in a sense, it would have no meaning for the people sacrificing themselves–no matter how much she entreated them to stop, it'd most likely be useless.

That's not so much irony as it is ignoring.

She can't stop that extremely efficient instinct to sacrifice one's life for the sake of justice and beauty. Why? Because the pure and noble "Princess Beauty" is the value system of the common people.

Consequently, she truly can't understand those feelings at all–and because she can't understand, the princess is worthy of being a princess.

Since doesn't understand the feelings of philistines and common people, she's "Princess Beauty".

A noble mind.

Or maybe you can think of it like this.

Princess Acerola is bringing people salvation through their deaths–the act of witnessing her perfects their lives.

Perfection–and, completion.

Well, nevertheless, Princess Acerola isn't such a simple person that she'd be convinced by an argument like, "The people who die for your sake are satisfied, so don't worry about it."

If that'd convince her, she'd have no trouble.

I wouldn't have any trouble either.

But, if that's the case, I don't have to crack her open.

If you don't crack an egg, you can't make an omelette–they say. But you can still make a boiled egg.

That's the skill of a chef.

"You are not depriving her of her beauty, but rather, making it so she does not appear beautiful–if so, charms against evil may be of use as a reference."

"Charms against evil? Huh? What's that. Sorcery?"

"No, it cannot quite be called sorcery. It is a kind of folklore, things parents perform so that supernatural beings like ourselves do not steal away their children–deliberately giving their babies evil-sounding names so they cannot be discerned by demons, things like that."

I'd think that evil names would actually be more likely to attract demons, but I suppose he has a point.

It's a peculiar flavor–somewhat different.

That risk is not limited to Princess Beauty in particular; it can apply to beauty in general–if you try to make that beauty your own, you may very well be visited by disaster.

So, even if you don't go so far as to give your children eccentric names to ward off evil, you can make them appear plain, simple, or even strange, so they won't become the target of any disasters–that's some human wisdom.

Because of her beauty, Princess Acerola became the target of my procurement; I can think up more lessons from that, but I'm not a creature who spouts lessons.

I'm a monster who eats humans.

Kill and eat. Kill to eat.

…But this topic does seem like it could help me think up a new name for Princess Acerola. It was a sudden inspiration that made me decide to do it, but if I'm giving her a name, I can't give her an name that's just evil or a name that's just weird.

If I do it, I'll have to think it over carefully.

"…? Is something the matter, Suicide-Master?"

"No, it's nothing."

I'm currently hiding the fact that I'm designing a new name for Princess Acerola from Tropicalesque–since he made such an uproar over me committing the name of a "lowly human" to memory, this loyal subordinate might very well get hysterical again if he learned that I was giving some thought to naming her.

That'd be a bother.

I don't want to get saddled with any more nuisances.

It'd lead to a loss of appetite.

"But, while there are those who try to become vampires in their pursuit of physical beauty, I don't think it's common for humans to pursue such endeavors."

"You are utterly correct. Humans are wretched, incorrigible fools."

Tropicalesque shrugged his shoulders, agreeing with something completely different from what I'd intended to say–this is starting to go beyond my impression that he's harsh on humans because he used to be one.

Maybe he even hated humans while he was still human.

Looking at Tropicalesque, I suddenly realized–no, if I say I realized it looking at Tropicalesque, that would mean I don't pay enough attention this hardworking slave, so let's say I suddenly realized it without any pretext–but the truth is, humans who've had their blood sucked to become servants have their bodies optimized.

That has the same significance as the idea expressed by 'beautifying one's appearance'.

Of course, it's not to the degree that he can destroy nations, but because I sucked Tropicalesque's blood, he's been blessed with even better looks than when he was a human.

He's become muscular, and he might even have gotten taller–if your physical condition is immune to disease, that's what is natural.

That's what it means to never grow old, to never die.

That's the meaning of immortality.

But if I may stop here and think, if becoming a vampire means acquiring both eternal life and physical beauty, what then becomes of mental beauty?

You could even say that isn't the meaning of immortality, but rather the conclusion of immortality.

While nowadays humans are his food, Tropicalesque keeps repeating discriminatory statements toward those of his former race, so it'd honestly be hard to assert he possesses a beautiful mind.

Well, I'm not saying his loyal spirit toward me isn't beautiful, but that's the only thing that is–

and there's certainly some discussion to be had as to whether that loyal spirit, in other words, that slave temperament should be valued highly in the first place.

And of course, looking down on Tropicalesque from my throne, sounding all high and mighty, I can't exactly say I'm the owner of a noble mind either.

I'm the vulgar existence Princess Acerola is aiming to be.

That's not something unique to the master and servant here, Deathtopia Virtuouso Suicide-Master and Tropicalesque Home-A-Wave Dog-Strings; I don't think vampires are elegant or dignified beings in general.

Of course, since our appearances are in order, vampires usually seem like high-class gentlemen and ladies inside and out, and have composed expressions like residents of upper-class society; however, because they're vampires, far from upper-class society, they're denizens of underground society.

We're not sociable creatures in the first place.

We simply reign in our shut-away communities.

And as for me, although I dwell in this Corpse Castle, it's not like I'm able to govern anything, and I certainly can't rule–I'm just a gourmet, I don't have that kind of knowledge.

I'm certainly arrogant and charismatic, but that doesn't fill my belly.

I'm satisfied if I can kill and eat delicious things; I could even say something self-deprecating, like, 'I'm even more shallow on the inside than humans'–though of course, that self-deprecation is also a kind of complacency.

Complacency at being above humans in the food chain.

That complacency is very different from "Princess Beauty's" humble attitude.

"Well… I suppose stuff like inner beauty isn't necessary for long life."

I concluded.

That's right.

An ethical worldview and sense of justice, a spirit of affection for the weak and an attitude to try and help even other races–what you might call 'inner beauty' is, in all likelihood, utterly unhelpful when it comes to long life.

Well, 'utterly' is going too far.

I've no doubt that the communication skills to sympathize with anyone and get along with everyone are secrets to longevity–but there's a limit.

There's something called 'moderation'.

If you want to live, there are times when you have to use vulgar means–for instance, if you become a vampire and possess both a healthy body and a wholesome mind, it's not unlikely that you'll take your own life, unable to endure your guilt over using humans, your former race, as food.

So vampires' mentalities might be quite essentially vulgar–maybe that's the price of eternal life.

Maybe humans are able to live beautifully because their lifespans are short.

Well, in that case it could very well stand to reason that short-lived bacteria and such are the most beautiful things in the world, but let's set that aside.

Even if we make use of our "charm" to the maximum, we'll never reach the level of "Princess Beauty" as long as we live.

That's not particularly sad, but perhaps thinking that it isn't sad is a limitation of being a vampire–well I can serve as a model for Princess Acerola precisely because that's how I am, so maybe I ought to think of that as a good thing.

“Really, what is the matter, Suicide-Master. For a while now, you have been deep in thought…

It cannot be that you died of starvation while I failed to notice, surely?”

A pointed comment.

“It’s really nothing. I said it’s nothing, so it’s nothing.”

I bluntly dodged the question.

“Never mind that, Tropicalesque. Did your information gathering bear fruit? I’m not certain whether my plan will be a success or not–if you have a suggestion with a higher degree of certainty, let’s hear it.”

“No, I am very sorry, Suicide-Master. Regrettably, I have nothing to report. I attempted to gather information, but the kingdom’s citizens are still wiped out, after all.”

It is in such a state that one cannot even walk freely, Tropicalesque said.

I thought he might have flown through the sky, but come to think of it, Tropicalesque isn’t able to grow wings yet–so he had to go on foot.

Marching his way through the corpses.

That must have been dreadful.

I wanted to reward him somehow, but it’s hard to do so given his lack of success–I don’t like rewarding people who don’t produce results.

“As the corpses had begun to decompose, I disposed of them with any means available to me; eating, burying, burning and such.”

“That’s wonderful. Well done.”

“?”

I tried forcing myself to praise him, but Tropicalesque just looked at me curiously–well, he probably can't say something like, "Your words are too much for me," when he receives praise that's off the mark.

I'm really not cut out for being a master.

"I have returned to the castle for the moment, but as I have created a path, once I have finished cleaning, I am planning to expand the scope of my information gathering to foreign countries–it is my humble idea to visit Princess Beauty's native country."

"Her native country. You've identified it?"

"No, my knowledge all stems from the fairy tale. However, I have several ruined countries which may serve as candidates."

"I see. Seems you have some prospects."

Though, having said that, it doesn't seem like he's produced anything from that line of thinking so far–I suppose all I can do is leave that to Tropicalesque, and carry out my own plan.

That is, the plan to make Princess Acerola "act worse than she is"–generally speaking, those

"actually a good person" cases are really just "occasionally a good person", but I'm sure that princess will succeed on account of that character of hers.

She won't be negligent in our effort to preserve her flavor and make her edible for me–I have no doubt she's practicing vulgar behavior by herself in her room right now.

"It's unfortunate that I can't hope for a more refined arrangement anymore, but simple refinement doesn't make for cuisine–

what's important is the taste. The flavor on the inside.

Come to think of it, even the humans have a saying that appearances aren't what's important."

"I am aware. It is certainly true. …However, what does 'Princess Beauty' herself intend to do?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well, your plan may go as you wish, Master–your appetite may be sated. Even if that plan produces a poor result in the end, you can think of another one. But to 'Princess Beauty', the moment your plan succeeds is the moment you sink your fangs into her. As such, I fail to understand Princess Beauty's goal–do you not think so?"

"……"

Certainly.

Since I only think self-centeredly from my own position, I'm liable to get the wrong idea, but it's not like she really wants to get eaten by me–she just doesn't want to slaughter humans; she just doesn't want to destroy nations.

But if she gets eaten by me the very moment that goal is realized, wouldn't that mean her priorities are mixed up?

Taking that into consideration, even though she joined a supernatural being like me in an alliance and entered this Corpse Castle–

From this point on, just what does the princess intend to do?

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"You can't hide the sense of an artist."

Whether we do this, whether we do that.

The princess probably just wants me to eat her.

At this point, she doesn't value her own life.

She's not the type to selfishly think of saving only herself while millions–tens of millions, in the worst case–of people sacrifice their lives for her sake.

No matter how emotionally desperate she might be, deciding against suicide and going out to continue her journey won't solve anything.

For my part, I think suicide would be a perfectly legitimate solution, but from her perspective, that would be abandoning the problem, not solving it.

And Princess Acerola doesn't care whether she lives or not, as long as she finds that solution–

moreover, she'd think it's a fair and decent deal to exchange her life for the conclusion of the

"Princess Beauty" fairy tale.

That's not entirely a happy ending, and it's not a conclusion that would satisfy or content the audience; regardless, in the princess' philosophy, a fairy tale to be handed down for posterity can't cut off so suddenly–it needs some kind of ending.

I don't suppose I can call it "stupid" and thoughtlessly dismiss it all.

That philosophy of hers will give me a chance to savor the finest of meats, so maybe I ought to feel thankful–however, I'm still a little uneasy, and I can't quite shake it off.

Something more precious than your life.

Something for which you'd exchange even your life.

But the only thing I can come up with is an ideal–is this something a vampire with eternal life can never understand?

If so, am I the stupider one?

I'm the one who's less beautiful?

Well, fine.

In any case, I need to proceed with my "Princess Beauty" remodeling project–even if it's for the sake of a meal, I'm fed up with taking care of a human for so long.

Being a caretaker is unbecoming of a master.

Although it's a job I could never have entrusted to Tropicalesque, of course, as that slave has once again departed the castle to gather information, I need to continue my remodeling project all by myself.

Well, since I don't intend to change her on the inside, would it be more accurate to call it a redecorating project than a remodeling project?

I want to be thorough in coaching her on her pronouns, way of speaking, and behavior; not only do I not set cutlery for her meals, I try to prepare the most primitive food I know.

Unfortunately, I'm still in the trial and error phase with her clothes.

Elegant dresses and such are out of the question, but having said that, if there's a slit

in the skirt or it exposes too much skin, it becomes strangely seductive.

Since seductiveness and beauty are fairly similar if you ask me, that isn't what I'd intended–it might be good to try for fashion that's unstylish, as they say, but even if it's for the sake of a meal, there's an aesthetic line I refuse to cross.

I'm sure Princess Acerola has one too.

Trying to find fashion that wasn't too elegant or stylish, but wouldn't spoil its contents was a real hassle.

Well, there might still be room for debate on that subject, I think.

Today, as usual (mood-wise, more like tonight, as usual), I was heading for the room I'd allocated to Princess Acerola to feed her and give her lessons–it wasn't my custom to knock, so I casually opened the door.

That might have been good, might have been bad.

I came upon a most unexpected scene–in the center of the room, Princess Acerola was trying to do something I could hardly believe.

Of all things, Princess Acerola was holding up one of the room's silver candlesticks with trembling hands, about to try and stab it into her own right eye.

Into that shining silver eye.

I'm bad at thinking, but acting before thinking is my specialty–tossing away the meal plate I was carrying, all at once, I manifested the maximum instantaneous power of a vampire and leapt into the room.

Snatching the candlestick with my right hand, I pushed Princess Acerola away with my left–

since the candlestick was made of silver, a burning pain ran through my palm, but to me, it was a simple scratch.

Well, more like a scald than a scratch.

As I'd intended in pushing her, Princess Acerola had fallen onto the bed–lying face up, she looked at me.

"S-Suicide-Master!?"

She made a surprised face.

I'm the one who should be surprised.

I even felt angry.

"Are you an idiot!? After coming here and everything else, why would you suddenly waste your life like that!?"

It was quite an ethical line, one that would seem unlike a vampire to say, but it was what I really thought–didn't this princess have wishes she wanted to come true, even at the cost of her life?

If she committed suicide here, the precious foodstuff I'd gone to such pains to raise would all come to nothing; so, faced with the reality of her trying to commit suicide, I became enraged.

However, it seems I came to an overly hasty conclusion.

Happens a lot.

"You misunderstand, Suicide-Master." Princess Acerola got up from the bed and started to explain. "Oh, er, don't get the wrong idea, Suicide-Master."

She corrected herself.

To be vulgar.

"I am, er, I'm certainly not attempting–trying–to commit suicide. If I gouged my eye out like that, er, well… I thought being pirate-like would improve my presence."

She might be greatly confused at my accusatory attitude, since the speaking style she'd started using recently had gotten jumbled, but that's alright–at the very least, she conveyed what she'd intended with that act of self-harm.

Presence, huh.

Well, pirates' eyepatches aren't always the result of an eye getting gouged out, but if I interpret this as part of our current endeavor, this might actually be a situation in which I, as Princess Acerola's vulgarity professor, ought to praise her for admirable courage.

But I said, "Don't it again. I recognize your effort, but this is a bit off the mark. I respect that you're willing to do anything to achieve our goal, but doing that won't solve anything."

"W-why?"

After being asked, I thought of a reason why–might say it was a bit of a stretch.

"You're not immortal like me; there are injuries that humans like you can't recover from. Even if you got a presence and even if you made that bluff work, it should only be 'pretending', only a matter of 'pretense'. What would you do if you really got hurt? Isn't that the same thing all those humans who sacrificed themselves for you did? You mustn't make sacrifices to stop being Princess Beauty–if you do, that's the same as trying to solve the problem by dying.

"It's abandoning the problem."

I ended up repeating the words Princess Acerola had spoken herself.

“You are right… you are completely right. I am sorry, Suicide-Master. I will reflect on this.

Please forgive me.”

When she gets this despondent, even I feel awkward–no, not awkward, maybe guilty? That would not be good. I might very well commit suicide yet again due to those guilty feelings.

Anyway, I judged that continuing this conversation any further would be inadvisable, so I decided to conclude this affair for the time being.

“Your way of speaking is muddled again. I mean, it isn’t muddled.”

“That is true–that’s right. My mistake, Suicide-Master.”

Correcting her posture, or rather, uncorrecting it, Princess Acerola proudly apologized–right, that’s good. Or should I say bad? If I think about this too much, I’ll probably get mixed up.

“Hm.”

Having reached a point where I could pause, I finally had some time to survey the interior of the room, and I realized it was in total disorder.

All of the furniture had been moved since last I saw it, not just the candlesticks–fallen down, knocked over and such.

I thought I’d inadvertently caused a whirlwind when I’d leapt into the room, but that didn’t seem to be the case–it appeared Princess Acerola was the one who performed this

“remodeling”.

One part of the endeavor, huh.

I suppose she intended to “look bad” by messing up the room–well, I certainly couldn’t call the state of the room “beautiful”.

Setting aside that tendency of hers’, this princess is really a hard worker.

It’s unfortunate that her effort has only backfired until now.

A vicious cycle of trying not to kill people, but ending up killing people for that very reason.

It can’t be helped.

However, looking closer, there seemed to be a certain regularity to the disorder of the room–

things were scattered at identical intervals.

You can’t hide the sense of an artist.

Depending on how you saw it, you might even call this arrangement an aesthetic.

Thinking that we still had a long, long way to go, I laughed, “Ka ka!”

“I-is something amusing?” Princess Acerola asked vexedly, but I really was laughing because something was funny–although, I guess this could even be a case of laughing due to despair.

“Oh, no, I was just showing you an example. An example of a laugh that has a big presence and sounds cool.”

I said that to dodge the question, but now that I think about it, I don’t think I’ve seen a so-called smile from this princess yet.

I haven’t seen her smile, and I haven’t heard her laugh.

Strictly speaking, my memories from when I’d tried to eat her and killed myself are

uncertain, but I'd find it hard to believe she'd smile in a scene like that.

Laughing at someone committing suicide in front of you, stuff like that is what you'd expect from a vampire.

"You ever laughed before?"

Her facial expressions are far from plentiful in the first place.

She only makes a face when she's surprised or confused–could she be deliberately feigning a lack of emotion?

Is it etiquette for high-class women not to show their emotions? That's what I thought, but the truth was the opposite.

"If I inadvertently smile, countries come to ruin."

Princess Acerola said.

By no means an exaggeration.

If you can rob others of their lives with just a smile or a frown, there's nothing strange about making it a habit to stifle your emotions–even without my suggestion, unconsciously, this princess was making an earnest effort to conceal her own beauty.

But being unable to laugh makes for a dull life. I'm afraid of stress exerting a bad influence on the flavor of her meat–I've got to think up a countermeasure right away.

"So, Princess Acerola, from now on, you ought to laugh like I showed you with that example.

That'll be far from beautiful."

"D-do you mean the 'ka ka' laugh? That one?"

"That's the one. Like this. Ka ka!"

"Ka ka!"

Even a model student like Princess Acerola couldn't quite deal with such a sudden, unreasonable demand, so it was a stiff smile, but as a first step, it got a passing grade.

"That'll be good. Nobody will die from that laugh."

"Ah, thank you very much. I mean, no problem."

"That's the spirit, Princess Acerola. Or, that's not the spirit. I'll go make your food again, so keep practicing until I get back."

After giving that order, I went out into the corridor–luckily, the plate I'd tossed aside when I leapt into the room wasn't broken.

The food was scattered around, though.

Looking at it, I was at a loss for words.

I.

Could no longer say anything.

Of course, part of that feeling was regret that the food I'd specially cooked had gone to waste, but there were other parts to it.

Well, it would be cruel to tell the princess to eat food that's dropped on the floor–I'm still not so uncouth as to go that far.

If I go that far, it'll influence her insides.

Exterior and interior.

It's a hard distinction to make, but…

You might even say they're the same thing.

She didn't even hesitate to gouge out her own eye, so she might do it if I told her to; however, if I coerce her imprudently, it might be judged not as instruction but as maltreatment, and I'd be in danger of having that "attack" bounce back at me.

"Ow…"

The scald on my right palm hurt as I gathered up the food–I might be immortal,

but damage done by silver objects takes a while to heal.

Even more so, since I haven't eaten anything recently.

I'd never thought I'd say such a commonplace line, but man, this princess is a lot of trouble.(1) Not exactly a simple recipe, huh.

Maybe I should have taken all the pointy and sharp objects out of the room just in case–hm?

Just then, I realized.

Now that I think about it, the damage on my right hand remained, but there was nothing on my left hand–even though, of all things, I pushed Princess Acerola away?

Not even a scratch.

Nothing had bounced back at me.

I was unharmed.

"……?"

Did it not get deemed an attack because I pushed her onto a fluffy bed, and she took no damage? Well, I'm sure it's something like that.

However, if that's what it was, I should think of it as nothing more than good luck.

Carelessly touching Princess Acerola means death for me.

I ought to avoid any more deaths.

Even if I have immortal youth, it's not like I have unlimited deaths.

"Ka ka."

I heard an awkward laugh from the other side of the door.

Hmph.

I recognize her effort, but with this, it seems like it'll be some time before I teach

her the cool, tough, loud laugh I emit when I'm in the very best of moods–thinking about that, naturally, my expression softened.

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"Carry out your duty, Tropicalesque Home-A-Wave Dog-Strings."

Somehow or other, it seems I've died again.

Starvation, yet again.

Died on my throne, yet again.

And this time, Tropicalesque found out.

"I beg you, Master, stop this. For goodness' sake, please eat something. If you still insist on not eating even now, please cut off my head."

With my slave assailing me so strongly, I couldn't even bring myself to tell him to call me Suicide-Master instead of Master.

This isn't a good time.

Tropicalesque is right.

Unpleasantly right.

"Just how many times have you died in places where my eyes cannot reach? Even for a death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire such as yourself, this is simply too many deaths."

I didn't need to be told.

But, although I recognize the truth of his words, I'm still fasting—I decided that the first thing to enter my stomach will be "Princess Beauty".

I decided.

It was a simple idea at the start, but now it's a line I absolutely cannot cross. If that princess isn't the first thing I eat, I would stop being myself—I couldn't call myself Suicide-Master anymore.

That's how much the idea bothers me.

I don't want to call myself something like "Former Suicide-Master".(1)

"You think I can give up now? Do you know how much I've invested in that princess? I've gallantly taken care of Princess Acerola; I'm practically her butler. I've started to get on the right track—as a chef, not a butler, that is. If I hold out just a little longer, I'll be able to enjoy the finest of meals."

"How much time is 'a little longer', specifically?"

This Tropicalesque, who, ordinarily, gallantly looks after me like a butler, is not budging an inch tonight.

Even though I clearly declared my conviction, he's not withdrawing, and he's holding his own.

"Do you actually intend to consume 'Princess Beauty' in the first place?"

"…I can't let that pass."

"If you will not heed my words, I beg you, cut off my head."

Tropicalesque stubbornly repeated.

Stubbornly, as a butler.

Maybe even childishly.(2)

He doesn't want me to make light of it and say, 'I could never do that'; he really wants me do it.

Tropicalesque, familiar with my policy of eating what I kill, is trying to make me eat him by deliberately getting killed.

Impertinent bastard.

Well done.

But, you think I'll be fooled by your sleight of hand?

I won't even eat that hand of yours.

I'll eat Princess Acerola first.

"In that case, can you not eat her right now? Surely adequate preparations have been made at this point."

"Hey, that's why I said 'a little longer.' I've taken care of most of the unsavoriness, but it's still not ready. I don't want to fail after getting this far. It's natural to be cautious and wait for the proper time. Are you saying I shouldn't?"

"With all due respect, Master, have you not developed an attachment to that human while taking care of her?"

Tropicalesque said, without much due respect.

Glaring at me, his master.

"…What does that mean."

"I am inquiring as to whether you intend to continue keeping 'Princess Beauty' at Corpse Castle in this manner—I beg of you, please say you do not."

I don't.

There's no way.

Wouldn't that mean I'd all but fallen captive to Princess Beauty? I've only ever seen her as food.

I'm raising her in order to eat her.

If I solemnly, powerfully asserted that right now, I'm sure Tropicalesque would have believed me—at least, he'd have no choice but to believe it.

There's no other option for a servant.

So maybe I ought to have done that.

If I couldn't cut off his head, and if I'm a master my slave can rely on, I ought to have at least said the words for his sake.

But I couldn't even do that.

Hearing it for the first time made me realize, living like that wouldn't be that bad.

I made a mistake.

Why had I gotten so flustered seeing Princess Acerola trying to stab herself? I was at a loss for what to do, thinking that there was still such a long way to go in my 'Princess Beauty'

redecorating project, so why could I not help but smile?

I think I've realized the answer.

While raising the princess, the raising itself had become enjoyable, and I'd gotten my priorities backward—I was embarrassed at being cleverly found out, but I couldn't say the words to deny my feelings.

Even Tropicalesque must have realized a long time ago that I had a scald on my right palm from touching a silver object—if he's seen that, what can I say at this point?

So,

"That doesn't matter; make your report already. Carry out your duty, Tropicalesque Home-A-Wave Dog-Strings."

I ordered, in a rude tone of voice.

It's not like I could hide anything by doing that, though.

"…I have no achieved no results. As I said before, I crossed the border and visited Princess Beauty's native country, but…"

Tropicalesque didn't even try to hide his displeasure, but he followed my order—setting aside that inappropriate, rebellious behavior, I'm sure he'd have gleefully told me if he'd found a way to eat Princess Beauty, so I don't suppose he was lying.

Unlike me.

“There is a tendency for those who know about Princess Beauty in much detail to sacrifice themselves—I could hardly even gather gossip on potential countermeasures.”

It didn’t seem like an excuse.

The one making excuses here is me—by a lot.

No, in my case, it’s not even an excuse.

I’m just hiding my embarrassment.

Completely unbecoming of a vampire.

“Is that so. Then I guess all we can do is focus on the current plan. Good work.”

I praised my subordinate, regardless of the fact he hadn’t produced any results; yet Tropicalesque did not seem happy at all.

Had he noticed how excited I was when I said “focus on the current plan”?

That might get awkward, so I pressed forward.

“You said 'hardly even'—did you find something?”

“Well… Something small. However, it is on the level of a fairy tale, such that it would be foolish to actually say.”

“Fairy tale? That’s fine. 'Princess Beauty’ is a fairy tale, after all.”

The plan to cancel out the curse with another curse had died, but an alternative plan to cancel out a fairy tale with another fairy tale could be possible.

I urged him on, not just because I thought it wasn’t a bad idea, honestly, but also to cheer up my discouraged slave.

“It’s fine, tell me about it.”

But from Tropicalesque’s perspective, my concern was surely unwarranted.

It must have been worthless, trivial information he'd have preferred not to report it if he could—

and I ended up forcing him to talk about it.

"It is not a specific fairy tale, but rather a tradition in general human society," Tropicalesque said, leading in—and it really was unhelpful information, something we couldn't use at all.

"It has been determined since ancient times that the only way to break a curse on a princess is with the kiss of a prince."

"…Ka ka."

Hey now.

What can I do with that?

I might be reclining in a throne, but I'm hardly a prince–I'm a monster!

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"You either eat it all or leave some left over."

Seriously, if a prince's kiss is the only thing that can lift the curse or blessing or whatever it is on "Princess Beauty", then I have no choice but to give up.

If Princess Acerola's nomadic journey was for the sake of finding a prince, then that might be a nice conclusion to her story, or perhaps her fairy tale; however, as a practical matter, it's hard to believe such a prince really exists.

Of course, I'm not one.

What idiot would accept a princess into his country who's liable to destroy it? A prince like that would be altogether unfit to govern.

Unqualified to be a ruler.

Even if there were an eccentric, I mean, earnest prince who'd abandon his whole country and betray all of his people to help Princess Acerola, I imagine she'd reject him for holding such a dangerous mentality.

Her past self-sacrifices and steadfast disregard of the consequences are both the true forms of what's come to torment her the most.

But if we force ourselves to follow that route despite all that, I'll nab a prince from some country as a vampire would, and introduce him to Princess Acerola.

If I'm not just grooming and rearing my food, I'm breeding it too, then my love of cooking may have grown so intense I might

as well open a restaurant—actually, that could be a legitimate idea.

But I didn't have the motivation to do that—I didn't want to see Princess Acerola married off to some handsome prince.

Silly of me.

"I'm the one who'll defeat you!" is a line I've said countless times, but I'd never even imagined saying something like, "I'm the one who'll save you."

What does it mean to save someone in the first place?

More like, eat, not save.(1)

Or rather, should I try to keep Princess Acerola confined to this castle until she dies, like some kind of evil witch?

Playing house with a princess.

…That might even be alright.

It's not like Tropicalesque seeing through to my hidden desires or whatever has caused things to get serious, but those ideas vaguely occurred to me anyway.

This isn't even the first time I've taken a liking to a human—even Tropicalesque, who I keep by my side, is a former human.

"Princess Beauty" isn't a special case—vampires often end up making humans they've tried to eat or tried to kill into their servants.

It's not unusual.

I'm sure even humans can develop attachment to the animals they've raised for meat, and stop wanting to eat them while caring for them—there are even vegetarians, people who've decided to not eat meat at all.

Well, Tropicalesque takes pride in being my only servant—and Tropicalesque looks

down on humans as inferior creatures—so it's understandable he'd be opposed, but I could even say his opposition hasn't caused any big problems.

I mean, even if I develop an attachment to Princess Acerola, even if I stop being able to see her as food, that's all it would be, nothing more.

No matter how beguiled I might be by "Princess Beauty", I won't make her my servant.

Or rather, I can't.

It's impossible.

For vampires, making someone into a servant and making them into a meal are essentially the same—sinking your fangs in and drinking their blood.

You either eat it all or leave some left over.

That's the difference.

I can't even touch the princess, so I can't make her my servant—the most I can do is keep that woman confined in this castle until she dies.

It's just a matter of a few decades, then.

I won't say "before you know it," but to a vampire who possesses eternal life, it's just a period of time—that period won't be a threat to Tropicalesque.

Just a few decades.

Actually, it'll be even shorter, I suppose.

There's no way I can keep looking after a human indefinitely—as surely as I can't make Princess Acerola my servant, the princess will eventually exhaust me.

If I come to the conclusion that I can't look after her any more, I'll liberate her from the

castle and release her back into the wild—like unchaining a pet you can no longer keep.

It'd be irresponsible, but really, I never had any rights over Princess Acerola, let alone responsibilities.

Let alone that; she might even give up on me as "unhelpful" and try to leave the castle herself

—and, as a matter of fact, I'd have no way of stopping her.

Powers and abilities are meaningless before that beauty.

Princess Acerola would resume her nomadic journey, violently destroying countries again—on account of her lofty sense of purpose, Princess Acerola wouldn't be able to stop her journey, even if it meant humanity would go extinct.

Vampires would experience food shortages, and then go extinct as well.

That's a situation I'd wanted to avoid, but if there's nothing I can do, then all I can do is give up.

It's our inescapable destiny.

All we can do is await the appearance of an extraordinary prince—well, now, there's no use brooding over it.

It's not like I've already decided I won't be able to eat the princess—even though what Tropicalesque pointed out wasn't entirely off the mark, if Princess Acerola gets to the point where I can eat her, my appetite might win out in the end.

I'd concluded that preparations at present had not proceeded to a stage at which she could be eaten, but I wouldn't go so far as to say we're on the wrong track.

Even now, I ought to consider my feelings and keep all the possibilities open.

Ah, but that's right.

That's right.

Might be high time I decided on her new name. Our preparations have at least gotten that far—

I shouldn't put it on hold indefinitely, and now that I've run out of other ideas, I ought to get inspired and make up my mind all at once.

Really, what kind of name would be appropriate for a woman who has a beautiful, shining heart, like an Oriental sword—oh, right.

It's foolish to think that a kiss could lift her curse, but it might be a good idea to include that word somewhere in the name as a superstition or a good-luck charm.

016

"There's no need to think anymore."

Somehow or other, it appears I've died again.

Starvation.

I don't know how many times it's been anymore.

I've just about had enough of starvation, but even if I'm tired of it, I can still can't stop—let alone stop, it's getting more frequent.

As usual, I don't have good memories of my deaths, but my intuitive impression is that I've been dying of starvation two or three times every night.

My endurance ought to fill back up after I come back to life, but I feel as though chronic fatigue is building up throughout my body; my fasting lifestyle might be nearing its limit.

I wouldn't say I'm unsteady on my feet, but in this condition, I probably shouldn't be looking after a human—I can barely take care of myself anymore.

Literally.

I'm hopeless.

Good grief.

Stirring a hand through my golden hair, I sorted out the memories from just before I died.

That's right, I remember.

This time, I died while thinking about Princess Acerola's new name—that was close; that death by starvation almost made me forget the fantastic name I'd finally come up with.

I'd thoroughly talked it out with her, and at the end of the discussion, we'd finally established a fashion that was "not too elegant, not too vulgar," but just right; if I hit her with a new name now, my preparations might take a huge step forward.

It might be about time to try and eat her again—at least, I'll set a bad example for Tropicalesque if I don't show that I still want to.

"……"

Then.

I realized.

I belatedly realized—much too late.

My head wasn't working at all due to malnutrition—where's Tropicalesque?

Where's my manservant?

After finishing his information-gathering trip without much to show for it, the slave should be in the castle, keeping an eye on me so that I don't die.

Despite that, he couldn't prevent me from dying by starvation (not entirely unforeseeable)… but he's always kneeling before my throne when I resurrect.

I can't say I've been able to build a very good relationship with him recently on account of the business with Princess Acerola, but he's always waited here for me to come back to life.

You couldn't find a more loyal slave.

I felt no signs of him.

Did he have some business to attend to outside the castle? Pursuing some new information for me? Or did he have an idea of some kind? Or rather, unable to put up with

such a foolish master, he finally ran out of patience and absconded?

…No.

If I, his master, can't feel any signs of Tropicalesque, my slave, that doesn't mean he's not nearby, or he's not in the castle, or any other sense of distance—it simply means he's "not".

Nothing other than that.

Nothing more than that.

Nothing but the worst possible meaning.

Tropicalesque, my slave, my servant.

And my friend.

I feel no signs of him—where did he go?

What did he do?

I got up from my throne and broke into a run.

Moving before thinking.

No; there's no need to think anymore.

There's no need think about where that formerly-human vampire went, or what he did—and now, what might have happened to him.

No need to think about it.

Nor did I want to think about it.

017

"There's a limit, even to immortality."

Princess Acerola was standing there in shock.

The dress I'd ordered for her was stained red—not just the dress; the entire room was stained deep red.

The floor, the walls, the ceiling.

Fragments of Tropicalesque were scattered about.

Blown to smithereens.

His head, his jaw, his neck, his shoulders, his arms, his elbows, his hands, his fingers, his nails, his chest, his back, his abdomen, his hips, his bottom, his thighs, his knees, his shins, his feet, his bones, his tendons, his muscles, his arteries, his veins, his heart, his stomach, his lungs, his bowels, liver, his teeth, his tongue, his lips, his nose, his ears, his hair, his eyes.

His golden hair, his golden eyes.

That golden hair, those golden eyes I'd given him—centered around the princess, smithereens radiating linearly outward.

That's the only way to describe it.

Only I could have recognized "this"—"these"—as Tropicalesque Home-A-Wave Dog-Strings.

What have I done?

A good man's been ruined.

I'd kept him by my side because he had a nice face—I'd have been happy had he just stayed by my side.

My only servant.

"Suicide-Master…"

In her state of shock, Princess Acerola called my name.

"You don't have to say anything."

Don't say it.

I know without being told.

When I'd first tried to eat "Princess Beauty" back in that shack, I'm sure my body was smashed and scattered at least this much.

So.

It's obvious what Tropicalesque tried to do to Princess Acerola, and what became of his attack.

The loyal slave could no longer stand the sight of such a foolish master.

But he hadn't gotten fed up with me.

No, he tried to put an end to the cause of my foolishness—he tried to kill Princess Acerola, whom I was being so particular about, whether as food or whatever else.

Of course, I didn't order him to do it.

On the contrary, I gave him strict orders to stay away from Princess Acerola—he should have understood how dangerous it would be for him to be near her.

Yet this loyal slave went so far as to disobey me in order to kill her—he disobeyed me for my own sake.

Without permission.

Even though slaves ought to be unable to disobey their masters.

"He will come back to life, will he not? As he is a vampire like you."

Princess Acerola asked nervously.

In her original style.

Without trying to wipe off the blood adorning her cheeks.

“He will come back to life right away, will he not?”

“……”

I didn’t want to answer.

I don’t want to admit the truth.

But whether I want to admit it or not, the truth is the truth.

“He won’t come back.”

I admitted it.

“He isn’t the same kind of vampire as I am. He’s a former human, and he’s still far behind me in terms of life-force and regeneration ability.”

“That’s…”

I didn’t have the composure to worry about Princess Acerola’s astonishment—really, no matter how long you try to live, it’s meaningless if you have a mind this weak.

Actually, from Princess Acerola’s view, this situation is like a betrayal.

I’d told her that if she came to my castle and did what I said, she wouldn’t kill people anymore, so, preparing herself to be treated as food, she suspended her nomadic journey and played along with me, but in the end, as if our misdirected effort had no value at all—a single life was smashed up right before her eyes.

That Tropicalesque isn’t a human, or that he’s a monster, or anything like that—that he didn’t try to sacrifice himself to her, but instead killed himself—doesn’t matter to this kindhearted princess.

If someone dies, she’s sad.

She doesn’t like destroying countries.

"Does that mean," Princess Acerola said. "Suicide-Master… if you continue dying, sooner or later you will die for good?"

"Yeah. I don't have unlimited deaths."

There's a limit.

There's a limit, even to immortality.

I didn't come out and tell her that I was nearing the limit of my life-force due to my repeated deaths by starvation, but she's a clever princess, so I guess she figured it out.

"I am leaving," Princess Acerola said immediately.

Decisively.

"I appreciate your kindness, Suicide-Master."

"Wait. It's obvious my eating habits are risky. And it's not your fault Tropicalesque died. It's something for me to regret, not you."

"No, I ought to regret it as well. If I had not come here—this man would not have died."

That's right.

But despite what she says, Princess Acerola—"Princess Beauty" doesn't have anywhere to go, does she?

Where would she go if she leaves this castle?

Won't there be heaps of bodies and rivers of blood wherever she goes?

Can this princess continue her aimless journey with that knowledge—can she keep wandering until she dies?

Can she keep killing until she dies?

I should stop her.

But I don't have the means.

If I tried to stop her with brute force, all of that force would bounce back at me—all that

would mean is Princess Acerola getting one more thing to worry about.

It would just be one among a great number, but this princess can't overlook even one.

So there's nothing I can do.

From the beginning, she was a food I couldn't manage.

A food I couldn't manage, and a woman I couldn't manage.

"It appears you understand. In which case, I will take my leave, Suicide-Master. We will likely not meet again."

"I get it. It's alright. I can't stop you; do as you like. But wait just a little, please. Please don't move from there while I'm eating—I don't want this precious food to get stepped on."

The only one who can step on him is me.

I said.

I reached out my hands to the fragments of Tropicalesque.

To his head, his jaw, his neck, his shoulders, his arms, his elbows, his hands, his fingers, his nails, his chest, his back, his abdomen, his hips, his bottom, his thighs, his knees, his shins, his feet, his bones, his tendons, his muscles, his arteries, his veins, his heart, his stomach, his lungs, his bowels, liver, his teeth, his tongue, his lips, his nose, his ears, his hair, his eyes.

To his golden hair and golden eyes.

To my loyal servant, who desperately wanted me to eat—to my loyal servant, who desperately wanted me to eat him, I reached out my hands.

018

"Surely the witch's curse couldn't have such an emotional blind spot."

Honestly, I was at a loss for words, facing the reality of Tropicalesque being blown to smithereens like I was when I'd first been done in by "Princess Beauty"—because it meant that the rearing and training I'd done to the princess had born no fruit.

My redecoration hadn't meant a thing.

No matter how much I remold her outward appearance, how much she feigns and pretends, whether she changes her way of speaking or her adds new character traits, whether she changes her fashion or eats with her hands, that vain struggle to "act bad" has proved ineffective.

From beginning to end.

"Princess Beauty" remains beautiful.

In that sense, it's like I was the one who killed Tropicalesque.

It's like he died in vain, without meaning.

So I'll eat him.

If I kill it, I eat it. I eat what I kill.

That's my rule.

Honestly speaking, I can't exactly say that Tropicalesque's meat was the most flavorful, since he crudely prepared it by breaking into pieces with all his might, but that doesn't matter.

It's not an issue of delicious or disgusting.

Eat. Eat. Eat. Eat.

Gobble gobble gobble gobble gobble.

Chomp chomp chomp chomp chomp.

Slurp slurp slurp slurp slurp.

Gulp gulp gulp gulp gulp.

Crunching, chewing, swallowing, digesting.

I'll even suck on the bones, so as to not let a single drop of blood remain.

I'll eat all of him, even if I have to overturn my decision that the first food to enter my empty stomach would be Princess Acerola.

I won't tell him to forgive me, and I won't say grace before the meal.

Instead, I won't let him die in vain.

I won't let your death be meaningless.

The food chain.

Tropicalesque Home-A-Wave Dog-Strings's existence will be chained to the existence of Deathtopia Virtuouso Suicide-Master.

We'll connect, join together, and continue.

"……"

Princess Acerola intently watched me eat—she wasn't looking at me in disgust or disdain because I eat my own kind in addition to humans, or because I'll even eat my own servant; she watched me intently, through eyes filled with even stronger, more sincere emotion.

Through those silver and bronze eyes.

Without so much as a blink, she watched me intently.

I didn't know what emotion it might be, but her gaze was as sharp as a blade.

"It's hard to eat if you keep staring at me like that, Princess. Could you look the other way?"

"No, please allow me to watch, until you finish eating this man."

"…Do what you want."

I didn't get her intentions, but my first priority was to eat the pieces of Tropicalesque scattered around the room—before the corpse turned to ash.

To digest it before it vanishes.

"By eating this man, you will make his death neither meaningless nor in vain, then? This man whose death I caused," said Princess Acerola, as if talking to herself.

"I said so, didn't I? You didn't kill him. I killed him. So I eat him. That's all—although, I don't care what you tell yourself if it makes you feel at ease."

"…No. I do not intend to thrust myself into your relationship with this man. However, I am jealous. I am jealous that you can come to terms with the death of someone close to you by doing that."

Not just coming to terms.

I'm taking him into my body, into my heart.

I'm accepting him, inside of me.

"Just how many pointless deaths have I accumulated compared to that, I wonder. How many sins have I committed, I wonder."

"It's not something to be jealous of—before, I made a mistake and threw the food I'd made for you into the hallway. I thought it was a waste, but I couldn't intake it as nourishment. It could only be in vain, and meaningless."

Because I'm a monster, not a human.

It's no consolation or encouragement, but that's what I told her—after all, it's nothing more than differences in our eating habits.

"Differences in eating habits… so, should I have eaten the food you spilled?"

“Ka ka!”

She’s a thoroughly serious princess.

Even though I was eating, I couldn’t suppress my laughter.

“Don’t talk about things you can’t do. I said that too, right? My rules are just for me, and my eating habits are mine alone—I have no intention of forcing them on anyone.”

Everyone should just eat what they want to eat.

What they like, how they like.

After saying that, I finished eating Tropicalesque—the last of him that remained, his tongue, I stuck out my own tongue and swallowed whole.

“Sorry to keep you, Princess Acerola. You can go now. Well, there’s no need to fret over whether we’ll ever meet again—my stomach is full from eating Tropicalesque, so I can die loads more times now; if you ever get tired of traveling, come back and visit anytime.”

However, Princess Acerola didn’t move one step from where she was—without leaving the room, she stared at me intently.

As if she was thinking hard.

She looked right at me, her eyes overflowing with determination.

“Suicide-Master. I have something to ask of you.”

Resolved, without a moment’s hesitation, without a moment’s indecision, those silver and bronze eyes wide open—

“Please turn me into a vampire.”

Princess Acerola entreated me, the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicide-Master.

“Are you serious? Er, are you sane?”

“Yes. I wish to become a vampire.”

Even if she nods reassuringly, I could only think Princess Acerola had gone crazy—I had no idea why she’d suddenly say something like that.

I hadn’t thought.

Surely the princess wasn’t deadly serious when she said she was “jealous”, was she?

“As of now, I do not know a way to stop people from trying to sacrifice their lives to me. There might not be a way. If not, I at least want to appreciate the lives sacrificed to me.

“I want to accept them.

“If sacrificing their lives to me is an expression of their love, then I want to return that love by consuming those lives.

“I do not want their deaths to be in vain. I will eat the lives I have taken. I want to eat them.”

“……”

I really thought she’d gone off the deep end.

That she’d reached the limit of her desperation, and her thought processes had failed—but if Princess Acerola possessed such a weak mind, then the situation wouldn’t have become this difficult and distressing.

This is the result of her lofty ideals.

The natural consequence of her sense of beauty.

She was serious, she was sane; she was noble.

For the humans who die for her and then simply rot away, and all of their nations—Princess Acerola is trying to grant them meaning, by becoming her flesh and blood.

Really, it's beautiful.

How beautiful can she get?

"I implore you. Please turn me into a vampire—please suck my blood, Suicide-Master."

"…You know what'll happen, right? You'll no longer be able walk in the light of the sun."

"I understand. I know. You turn to ash if you bask in sunlight, you shatter if you see a cross, you burst into flames if you touch silver, and you disappear if you eat garlic, correct? I am asking you in full knowledge of that."

"That's not what I mean—I'm sure you'll be able to overcome those weak points eventually. But even if you can overcome the weaknesses, you can't overcome the dark side of it—you'll stop being human. You understand that?"

"I understand. I am asking you in full knowledge of that."

I give up.

This woman's more stubborn than I am.

She won't change her mind once she's decided.

There've been swarms of humans who wanted to become my servants because they wanted eternal life—there've been a great number of humans who wanted to become my servants in their pursuit of physical beauty. I've eaten enough of those people to get sick of it.

But this was the first time I'd met a human who wanted me to drink their blood because they wanted to eat people.

To atone for her atrocities by using those she massacred as food.

Really, could anyone else have made that decision?

"…I get the spirit of what you're saying. I think it's magnificent, and I'd like to answer positively."

"In that case—"

"But I can't. For the same reason I can't eat you, I can't make you my servant either—both of them involve me sinking my fangs deep into that soft skin of yours."

I'd thought about this once before. I'd thought about it more than once.

After Tropicalesque harshly pointed out my feelings, I thought I might be able to turn Princess Acerola into my servant instead of eating her—but no matter how I look at it, that's the same as eating her.

It's an act of harm against Princess Acerola.

It bears the same meaning as hurting her, damaging her, killing her.

So even if I try to make her a vampire, it would just bounce back at me—I would simply bite my own neck.

I'm powerless.

I can't even make her into a vampire, let alone eat her.

I can't eat her, and I can't help her.

"If it is something I desire myself, is it still impossible?"

"I'm sure it is. Even if we have a mutual understanding, any excessive act will be deemed an

'attack'—same as if you asked me to kill you."

When I'd brought Princess Acerola into this castle, I was meticulously careful to

neither use violent means nor lie to her—even that, now that I think about it, seems like a considerably dangerous thing.

Humans and vampires are both unable to do anything that would hurt or damage the beauty of

"Princess Beauty".

"As an extreme argument, your feelings, your mentality, and your desires all have nothing to do with it—same as you asking people not to die, but they all keep dying anyway. Those around you just destroy themselves and kill themselves of their own accord."

"……"

"If you tell me to do it regardless, I'm willing to give it a try, but in all likelihood it'll just end with you watching me messily committing suicide—haven't you had enough of seeing that already?"

"……"

"…?"

Is she not responding because she's accepted my words? Or is it because she can't accept them?

No, it doesn't seem to be either.

She hasn't given up—she's still thinking.

Even now, she still hasn't stopped thinking.

"Suicide-Master. You said my mentality doesn't matter, right?"

She finally spoke.

"…? Oh, yeah, I did. Well, I don't think it doesn't matter at all, but the more important factor is the surrounding—"

"Do you remember when I foolishly attempted to stab my own eye?"

I was confused at the sudden change of subject.

But of course, I remembered that incident well—the scald on my injured palm still hadn't recovered completely.

Though, I no longer think she was foolish.

I overreacted a little bit; at its root, it was an act in accordance with my suggestions.

"At that time, while you took the candlestick away, you pushed me onto the bed."

"Ah, that's right. What about it?"

"Why do you think you could push me?"

"Why…"

I'd thought about that.

The so-called "attack" on Princess Acerola ought to have been reflected back on the perpetrator.

"Isn't it because I pushed you onto the bed? I took no damage because you took no damage."

"I did not take no damage. It hurt quite a lot."

What?

That hadn't shown on her face at all.

"Even now, the outline of your hand clearly remains in the center of my chest."

"……"

Well, how about that.

Although she'd fallen onto a soft bed as I'd intended, there was still an action and a reaction arising at the moment I pushed her—even if she took no damage when she collapsed, the pain she felt at the moment she was pushed could only have been an "attack".

So even if it wasn't enough to get me chopped up, that "push" ought to have

bounced back at me—I shouldn't have been able to push her even if I'd tried.

So, why?

Why was I able to push Princess Acerola away?

"I have pondered it ever since, but in light of what you said just now, I have a hypothesis. If my own mentality does not matter, and what is essential is the mentality of surrounding people—"

Princess Acerola put her hand on her chest.

Must be where the outline of my hand was.

"Suicide-Master, you did not push me away in order to hurt me, but rather to protect me; do you not think that is why your hand was able to reach my chest?"

"……"

That's absurd.

Surely the witch's curse couldn't have such an emotional blind spot—but on the other hand, now that she's said it, I realize that a curse is just about the most emotional a concept there is.

However, isn't that just an issue of feelings?

If I might confess something, since I'm bad at thinking and had moved without thinking, I can't clearly say what I was feeling at the time that caused me to move—but, at the very least, I had no intention to harm or injure Princess Acerola.

I had only thought of taking the candlestick away.

If my hand left a bruise on her chest as a result—that's an issue of feelings.

Feelings.

My feelings.

“At the time, the 'attack’ you performed in ignorance of my feelings while I was attempting to pierce my eye was not regarded as an 'attack'—is that not because you acted for my sake?”

she said, as if to remind me—I thought that could be right.

If you just take that one incident, you might be able to call it an accident or a coincidence. But if we adopt her reasoning, it would explain why the humans ignore Princess Beauty’s feelings and keep dying.

The suicides are performed in the belief they were for the princess’ sake—as a result, regardless of how they might hurt the princess, or how she grieves and laments, she’s unable to prevent them.

She has a point. It’s one view.

That might also be why Tropicalesque was able to disobey my orders and act of his own accord.

But what does that even mean?

It’s certainly a new discovery, and helps explain Princess Beauty’s curse, but it’s not something that will break through our current situation.

Rather, doesn’t it reinforce the reality that I can’t make Princess Acerola into a vampire, no matter how strongly she desires it?

“No. Suicide-Master. Essentially… if you can eat me for my own sake, while thinking of me—

that itself will be preparation enough.”

Princess Acerola declared.

019

"If you're going to get poisoned, might as well finish the plate."

It's all a bunch of hypotheses.

Just piling hypothesis onto hypothesis.

They're the products of guessing, imagining, and wishful thinking, not one of which has been proved.

And on top of that, there's a fair bit of risk involved.

I said I'd be willing to try sucking her blood, but after repeatedly dying of starvation, there's no guarantee I'd properly come back to life if we fail.

There's no margin for error, and even once would be dangerous.

The princess won't just witness me getting blown to pieces, but might have to nurse me back to health too—I ate Tropicalesque, but I can't deny I'm still in a terrible food situation.

That's my own risk, but the risk to Princess Acerola is certainly not so low as to be ignorable.

Even if the hypothesis is right and I successfully suck her blood, it's entirely possible Princess Acerola is unable to become my minion.

I don't have precise statistics, but in my experience, cases where humans failed to turn into vampires are actually the most common.

If I suck their blood and they simply die, that's still a good outcome; others are liable to become nasty, zombie-like, repulsive

monsters both alive and dead at the same time.

It would be quite a pitiful if the fate of "Princess Beauty", the woman so beautiful as to destroy a nation, was to end up a zombie, of all things.

Also, if you tried counting them up, the risks and disadvantages would go on forever—I certainly couldn't call the princess' proposal a good idea.

Most importantly, the worst thing about it is how the outcome depends on my feelings.

When I suck Princess Acerola's blood, I need to sink my fangs into her for her own sake, not to satisfy my appetite.

I need to bite her impartially, unselfishly.

Can I do that?

When I'd snatched the candlestick out of the princess' hands, that was just on the spur of the moment, like a reflex—even if I'm told to just do the same thing, honestly, I don't know how to do it.

Even if I have an attachment to Princess Acerola as Tropicalesque had pointed out, I still have no answer as to whether that can take priority over my appetite.

In the end, I won't know unless I try.

In all respects, verification of this hypothesis is the same as poison testing, a performance without rehearsal.

However, Princess Acerola opened her arms wide as if she didn't feel anxious at all, and held out the back of her neck to me.

"Now then, I may be an imbecile, but let us proceed, Suicide-Master."

That small, fair, beautiful neck, transparent down to the blood vessels.

That alone arouses my appetite.

But right now, my appetite mustn't be aroused.

"This kind of courage is impossible for an imbecile. You certainly deserve better than to be left as a human."

"I will try my best to meet your expectations, my master."

"…Even if you become my minion, there's no need to talk like that."

Even in a situation like this, she's serious about such strange points.

"I'm abolishing minion slavery with Tropicalesque. He'll be my last one—he was proud of being my only slave, the hopeless fool."

"Is that so… In that case, how should I call you, then?"

"Just like you've been doing. Suicide-Master is fine."

Of course, this only matters if both of us live.

"If I have to say it, since you're my minion, you ought to become a vampire I'll be proud of.

Your way of speaking has gotten elegant again—what happened to that presence-building laugh I taught you?"

"Th-that's right. Ka ka."

Princess Acerola put on a stiff smile.

It was just a joke to try to ease the tension…

Things are going to get rough.

If we even make it that far.

"I feel no tension. I mean, I'm not. I'm not tense. I believe in you."

“Believe in me… hey, now. Don’t make me laugh in such a serious scene. Believing in people is virtuous, but I’m not a person, I’m a monster.”

“I am attempting to become such a monster myself—I wish to become like you,” said Princess Acerola. In no time at all, her way of speaking had reverted; her next line wasn’t one an inexperienced character would want to say. “To become a cool, tough, kind, and beautiful vampire like you.”

“…You’ll be able to do it.”

Princess Acerola.

Ignoring the latter half of her grumbling, I called her name.

“Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade.”

I corrected myself.

She looked at me, puzzled, so I explained.

“That’s your name, Kiss-Shot. Eat the humans who die for your sake like you’re kissing them. If you obtain immortality and live for a while, who knows, you might come across a wonderful prince someday.”

“Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade…”

As if reflecting, she recited it back.

“I like it, Suicide-Master. Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicide-Master. It is first-rate. I am very happy. I will endeavor to be a vampire who will bring shame neither to you nor to the name you have given me.”

“Ah, be diligent. …Right, right, speaking of diligence, here’s your last lesson. When you’re very happy, laugh like this.”

It was a bit premature, given how her way of speaking hasn't firmly solidified yet, but I don't know if we'll have another opportunity.

I shouldn't have any regrets.

If this is poison testing—if you're going to get poisoned, might as well finish the plate.(1)

"Ha."

I laughed.

Because I was very happy.

"Ha! Ha ha! Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha! Aha! Ha ha ha ha ha! Aha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha! Aha ha ha!

Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

As if doing vibrato, I laughed.

Because I was very happy to be able to savor the finest-quality blood, which was my heart's desire—and just as much at being able to help this princess.

"Go ahead."

Hearing that ever-beautiful voice, I plunged my fangs into the nape of Kiss-Shot's neck.

Like it was a trivial matter.

Kill and eat. Kill and love.

Like eating and loving were one and the same.

020

"Those rumors have been on my mind."

And so, once a daughter of nobility named Laura, the princess known long ago as "Princess Beauty" became the vampire called Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade.

Basically, it went well.

So well it was all but disappointingly anticlimactic.

She became a man-eating monster just as we'd planned, and I've kept on living—somehow or other, it appears I'm still alive.

Of course, I don't know the truth of why it went so well.

It's a mystery.

It's true that woman was dear to me in some way, but I'm not certain whether it was due to those feelings that I was able to suck Princess Beauty's blood and succeed in saving her.

It might simply have been that becoming a vampire and obtaining eternal life would prove beneficial to Princess Beauty, and that's why my fangs broke through the curse and were accepted.

In the end, I never figured out whether my feelings for her were of friendship, love, or even lust

—well, if it wasn't appetite, and even if we were wrong about the reasoning, it was a success, so none of that matters.

It's a good memory.

In any case, it's nearly 600 years later now, so there's no way to find out the truth—so, regardless of certainty, as for what happened

afterward: after becoming a vampire, the princess once again set out on an aimless, nomadic journey.

I couldn't live in a ruined kingdom forever, and after Tropicalesque passed away, Corpse Castle was much too large for me to live in all by myself, so I had no choice but to leave; I thought I might accompany her on her journey if she'd like, but I didn't.

We might both be vampires, but we walk different paths.

After all, if we're together, sooner or later we might end up wanting to eat each other.

So, I only know about it from rumors, but as I'd predicted, she became a magnificent vampire

—the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade.

Golden hair and golden eyes.

The oddity killer; the oddity king.

You must have heard of her.

Whenever I hear the rumors, as the one who sucked her blood, as the one who gave her those golden eyes to match her hair, as the one who named her, and as the one who choreographed her behavior, I feel proud of all of it.

The raw materials might have been good, but it's more blessing than a chef deserves.

Some time ago, I stopped hearing rumors about "Princess Beauty", so it seems that somewhere, somehow, she did something about that curse—maybe she really encountered a prince in one of the countries she visited.

Or perhaps, unexpectedly, her mind got nice and depraved by becoming a vampire, she turned vulgar, and her condition mellowed out. It would really be quite interesting if me sucking her blood had such a side effect.

It seems sucking the blood of such fine a quality foodstuff as “Princess Beauty” was good for me, since I’m still lively even now.

I’m alive and kicking.

I might be the oldest vampire ever.

Let alone that; contrary to the name Suicide-Master, dying’s become quite rare for me—she was quite the longevity cuisine.

If I’d met with my death as compensation for making her a vampire, that would’ve been beautiful, but this isn’t that kind of story.

To say it another way, it’s a happy ending.

They all lived happily ever after.

Although, the times have completely changed, and so has the world.

We’re in a golden age of science, and the circumstances for vampires to proliferate have disappeared; it’s a world in which I can’t gather food the way I’d want to. It’s shameful for a gourmet to say, but I’ve actually kept to a thrifty, temperant lifestyle. In today’s society, that wild overdrinking and overeating is nothing but a dream within a dream.

Good grief, I’ve gotten healthy, haven’t I.

Setting aside that joke only denizens of the world of night would understand, if I hadn’t drunk Princess Beauty’s blood back then, I’d probably have died of starvation a long time ago.

Supervision and regulation by the authorities has gotten strict, and vampires ourselves are in danger of extinction. “As long as there are humans, the supernatural will continue to exist”—it’s getting harder and harder to say carefree and optimistic stuff like that. Even the famous Santa Claus seems to be on the endangered list.

It’s a tough world out there.

Though, I don’t really mind when my food’s tough.

But I’d have preferred my remaining years to be more like a sweet desert.

In this state of worldly affairs, I suppose I can’t keep loudly calling myself the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire forever. Even my own way of speaking is really just a way to build presence, and it might be high time to change it—needless to say, I’m at a ripe old age myself.

But when I think of the student who used me as a role model and followed my example, there’s no way I can change—well, I guess I’ll stick to it a while longer.

Speaking of which, according to recent rumors I've heard, Kiss-Shot finally got exterminated by vampire hunting specialists in an island nation in the Far East—but really, that seems like extremely low-credibility nonsense to me.

I don't believe those rumors.

We've stopped interacting, but since she's more or less my minion, I can at least tell whether she's alive or dead.

Although, even if I'm ignoring them, those rumors have been on my mind.

I'm not worried at all, but well now, maybe I should go see her for the first time in 600 years.

If she's in good health, right, I'll invite her to dinner. I'll suspend my diet for just that one night, we'll make merry with so much delicious food that we won't even finish eating, and we'll celebrate our grand reunion. Or perhaps, curse it.(1)

As two fine women, I'm sure we've collected some cool, tough fairy tales to tell.

ARARAGI KAREN

Karen Ogre
001

Welcome to a new project! This arc features Karen as narrator, with one major supporting character–who will remain a mystery for now.

Karen Araragi is my name; in other words, I am Karen Araragi. Karen Araragi is me, and I am Karen Araragi. I'd thought that would go without saying, but according to Master, I didn't really understand even something as simple as that.

I don't seem to understand it at all.

I don't understand that I don't understand, and it appears I don't understand that I don't understand that I don't understand.

I'm Papa's little girl, Mama's firstborn daughter, Nii-chan's younger sister, Tsukihi-chan's older sister–I'm sixteen years old, I attend Tsuga no Ki Private High School, and I'm a first year.(1)

And above all, I practice karate.

But the question Master asked me then didn't seem to call for such a superficial answer.

As if it's not that my hands are empty, but that as a person, I'm empty on the inside.(2)

"I didn't think I'd live to see the day when I'd say this, but… Araragi. I have nothing more to teach you."

That's what Master told me.

"Total mastery, you know? You're already strong enough."

Perhaps even too strong.

I couldn't help but feel perplexed; did she summon me to the dojo without any warning just to say that? I had no idea why she was suddenly telling me this joke.

So I said clearly.

There's no way I've achieved total mastery, I'm still so far from being able to keep up with you, Master; isn't it true that I've never won a single real fight against you?–since I began training here, I've done nothing but lose.

Almost like I was protesting.

I did feel like I was stubbornly insisting on my own defeat, though.

"Only being able to see things in terms of wins or losses… that certainly hasn't changed since you started training."

Master said, smiling wryly.

"But when you've passed a certain level, things like winning and losing become less and less important–that's not limited to martial arts; it's the same for every genre. Even strength and weakness are relative concepts, stages we struggle through that are only temporary. You say that you've never beat me, but that's not how I consider it."

Then how do you consider it.

I questioned her again, but Master didn't answer directly.

"You don't hesitate to challenge those stronger than yourself, and you don't hesitate to help those weaker than yourself–I'm interested to know under whose influence you ended up with that kind of personality as a high school first year, but I guess we'll leave that aside. I'm sure you have your own reasons. In any event, it's the truth that

you've been brought along this far by your motivation–but because of that, it's about time you advanced to the next stage."

She said.

The next stage.

A stage where winning and losing, and strength and weakness held no meaning?

In that case, I honestly didn't want to advance to that stage.

I like competition, I like winning and losing, and I like becoming stronger–or conversely, I refused to be weak.

I hated being a coward who couldn't do anything.

I wanted to do something. Anything.

I wanted to do anything and everything I was able to.

I didn't want to only be able to watch when Nii-chan and Tsukihi-chan were suffering.

I think that's who I am.

I understand that I live in blessed circumstances, compared to other people. That's why I want to help people who aren't as blessed as me–I want to stick up for the weak and the powerless.

I think I want to be a hero.(3)

Even if I'm told it's just make-believe.

"That's a splendid motivation. Even as your master, I might even want to follow your example.

However, in order to carry out that wish, you don't need to face weak and strong folks around here–you need to face yourself."

Face myself.

"To know yourself. You need to know who you are. The time has come for you to learn

what kind of person you are. What, don't stiffen up at that–it's not such a difficult thing. It's not something you can be taught under my roof, either. I said so, didn't I? I have nothing left to teach you–from now on, you must study by yourself."

If you study properly, if you can earnestly reach the stage where I once stood–then I'll have a match with you.

Not a match between master and disciple, but a real fight between two equal karate practitioners.

…Honestly, I didn't understand what Master was saying this time–or rather, the more I listened, it became more and more unintelligible, to the point where it felt like I was listening to gibberish.

It was pleasant, but I didn't understand at all.

I think it's too soon for me to hear this.

But if I could have a match with Master as equals, I need to hear it–I had to grasp what she was saying, not just a word or two.

Equals.

I hadn't had that opportunity since I started training–of course, since I hadn't even won a training match so far, I probably couldn't even graze her fists, but that's okay.

It was my heart's desire. It was my dearest wish.

I'll do anything for it.

Anything and everything I'm able to do.

But just what should I do to reach it? I'll do anything, but what should I do?

To sum up, Master told me to face myself, know myself, to realize whoever it is I am,

but what if I'm just Karen Araragi, nothing more and nothing less?

"That's something I can't teach you–even your family can't. Only you can know just who you are. I should tell you, physically speaking, you're just about perfect. You have no shortcomings in your technical skill. It's not like I exaggerated when I said you have total mastery–if you say you can't accept total mastery, then you have no place in my dojo."

I don't want to be kicked out.

A person of extremes, my Master–though, that's why I apprenticed myself here in the first place.

Then, this Master of extremes said,

"Well, I can at least tell you how you can face yourself. A hint, I guess. You ought to do the same thing I once did–if you can't learn anything from that, then it's just your limit as a person."

It's fine if that's your limit.

Just being Karen Araragi.

Nothing more, nothing less.

In order to truly know that–this summer.

"Seclude yourself in the mountains, alone."

002

"Unusually for me, I'd even made a plan in advance."

And so, on the first day of my first summer vacation in high school, I, Karen Araragi, stood at the base of a mountain–from here on, I'll be confronting this mountain alone.

Well, according to Master, I'll be confronting myself, not the mountain–but in the end, I just don't understand Master's intentions.

What was she trying to say?

No clues have come to mind.

I tried to indirectly discuss what it means to "face yourself" with Nii-chan and Tsukihi-chan, but I didn't feel like I'd gotten very good answers–Nii-chan said,

"Well, you know, it's important to face yourself. It's very important. In particular, dialogue with yourself ought to be valued above all else. That's what our high school lives are about, generally speaking."

I didn't really follow what he was saying.

So I didn't really understand it.

I'd thought of giving him a wallop.

By the way, Tsukihi-chan said,

"Essentially, aren't you talking about going on a journey to find yourself?"

What, does she have an even shallower understanding of this than me?

Show me a bit of intelligence here, wise guy.

…Ultimately, I guess it's yet another thing I can only learn by myself.

Study hard, learn hard.(1)

Well, secluding oneself in the mountains is kind of a tradition for karate practitioners, so of course I'll do it if I'm told to–it's even something I'd longed to do someday.

An unavoidable ritual for those pursuing strength.

Master might even have sensed that secret dream of mine, and this was her roundabout way of encouraging it–no, she's not that kind of person.

She's not such a clever character–rather, she's brusque, and unrefined.

Roundabout expressions and roundabout detours are not her style.

Fundamentally, she has even more of a straightforward, bamboo-splitting personality than me (though she generally breaks tiles, not bamboo).(2)

I was pretty confused when she said she was interested in the source of my motivation, since Master has been quite an influence on my personality herself.

I suppose that confusion will be swept away by my seclusion in the mountains.

And so, she'd directed me to the Three Ouga Mountains.(3)

From this point on, I'll be traversing three mountains in the range extending before me–of course, since I've never actually climbed a mountain, I can't deny feeling slightly nervous.

Even I get nervous sometimes.

Strictly speaking, Master's directive wasn't for the so-called 'seclusion in the mountains' itself, but for standing beneath a waterfall.

Takigyou. Bathing in a waterfall.

Master instructed me to stand under a waterfall that I'd find after traversing the three mountains–to think, I'll be doing takigyou, even in these times.

Quite old-fashioned–I'm excited.

My heart's pounding.

I mean, my heart's seriously dancing around.

"It's called Ouga Falls. I was twenty when I stood under that waterfall–it's in a practically unexplored area, so getting there isn't an easy task, let alone bathing there; but even though you're only sixteen, I think you can do it."

After saying that, Master added,

"Ah, but if you think it's impossible, turn back now. You have a tendency to do the impossible–

or rather, you have a tendency to want to do the impossible, but because of that, retreating now would still be a good experience for you. And only go after getting permission from your family. We're talking about a girl of your age staying out on a trip alone, so let's not take it too lightly."

It was a bit of a a killjoy to hear such a sensible piece of advice at the end, but well, it is important.

Talking about a girl of my age staying out alone really increases the sense of adventure of my first summer in high school, but naturally I knew that climbing a mountain and standing under a waterfall alone are fundamentally dangerous undertakings.

That's common sense.

When it came time, I realized that 'mountain climbing' seems like a textbook

play for going to a party these days–so it was somewhat backbreaking work to convince my family.

It was especially backbreaking to convince Nii-chan.

A real knuckle-cracking, backbreaking pain.(4)

Unexpectedly overprotective, my brother.

All 'backbreaking' means is 'difficult', but at last Nii-chan seemed to understand that I'd head to the mountains even if I had to break his back, and he gave in.

It felt more like his knees had given in, though.

"If you'd go that far, then do as you please… There's certainly stuff you need to do and all. But I'll have you know, I'll be making a contingency plan for when things go badly."

Wow, that was actually a pretty cool thing to say.

'Making a contingency plan', I wonder what that is.

Don't just make contingency plans for me.

By the way, Tsukihi-chan said stuff like,

"Well, you know, whether you go alone or with everyone, mountains are fundamentally dangerous places. If you want to avoid danger, you wouldn't be climbing them in the first place, right? So it's alright, isn't it?"

My little sister really likes talking theory.

"Now that you mention it, if you asked a mountain climber why they climb up, some would just say 'because it's a mountain'–but then if you ask why they climb down, how would they answer? 'Because my family isn't here', maybe?"

I wanted to say, 'Show a little concern for me, will you?'–but I was really worried about my sister. Really, the one climbing the mountain worried about the one not climbing…

Lately, she's been doing kinda mysterious stuff by herself, with that stuffed doll.

Anyhow, I got permission from my family as I'd been instructed by Master, and finally, I was going to challenge this mountain–my preparations are perfect.

Unusually for me, I'd even made a plan in advance.

Three Ouga Mountains.

Passing through Oniai Mountain,(5) Senshin Peak,(6) and Kachi-kachi Mountain(7) to get to Ouga Falls–if I cross one mountain per day as planned, I'll get there and back entirely within one week.

One week.

Honestly, since I'd waited so long for this mountaineering trip, I wanted to stay for more like one year, but I couldn't really do that as a high school student–so, I'll make use of my one week of summer vacation to enjoy this adventure to the utmost.

Well, let's get going.

Shouldering the twenty liter-sized bags I'd borrowed from Mama, I took one step forward.

The first step toward my meeting with Karen Araragi.

003

"I've been promised two chocolate doughnuts."

But after that first step, I ran right into a wall–a metaphorical wall, of course; it's not like there was a real wall at the start of the mountain trail.

Slammed right into it.

Pretending to be careful and wise, I thought it'd be better to confirm my path before I set foot on the mountain, so I took out the map Master had given me from my jersey pocket–and got very confused.

What the heck is this?

It was a type of map I'd never seen before–I couldn't even tell where I was, let alone where my path would lead.

Seems like it's in code or something, I can't read it at all.

There were a lot of random lines, and from a distance, it felt like looking at a 3D picture without 3D glasses. What, had Master intended to give me a map, but had mistakenly given me a piece of modern art–though I don't know much about that.

I don't know much about art or modernity.

"That is not a normal map, 'tis a topographic map."

Suddenly hearing a voice right beside me, I jumped back–before I'd become aware of her, as if she was clinging tightly to my side, someone was standing right next to me.

I was more surprised at the fact that I'd let someone get so close to me without realizing,

than at hearing an unexpected voice–just how deeply was I concentrating on that map?

Turning around, it was a girl with a ponytail, around middle school age–speaking of ponytails, I'd also made my hair into a ponytail like I used to a long time ago, but unlike mine, this girl's ponytail was blonde.

Her eyes were golden too.

A foreigner… probably?

It didn't seem like she'd dyed her hair or was using color contacts–and she was on the taller side for a middle schooler, though not as tall as I'd been.

In the summer vacation of my first year in high school, my height had finally come within striking range of 180 centimeters,(1) but from what I could tell by looking, this girl appeared to be at least 170 centimeters(2) tall.

So maybe the reason her voice sounded overly close was just one of those so-called cultural differences–there's even some places overseas where the national greeting involves stuff like embracing and kissing.

If that's what this is, then.

For the time being, I decided to let down my guard by about half, and replied, "Hi there."

It seems like good manners to greet people you meet while mountain climbing–strictly speaking, I hadn't started climbing yet, but I had nothing to lose by saying hello.

"Uh huh. Don't worry about it."

…With that kind of response, I felt like I really had lost something by saying hello, but this was probably just another cultural difference.

Or maybe she's still studying Japanese.

Maybe she learned Japanese from historical dramas.

Well, it's not like my way of speaking is all that lovely either.

"Umm… a topographical map?"

"Roughly speaking, 'tis a map directed at people with lots of experience. The altitudes and unevenness of the mountains are described in detail–'twould be difficult for a first-timer to judge their route just from this. I've just come down from climbing this mountain myself…"

She must have learned Japanese from historical dramas, how else would she have been taught that antique style of speaking–what, so she's a mountaineer?

Hearing that, I fully relaxed my guard–now that I look properly, we are wearing similar jerseys.

Her shoes looked excessively clean for someone who'd just climbed down a mountain, and it seemed like she was traveling a little too light for it, but I'm sure that's just because she's an expert.

"Here. Since I'm not using it anymore, I'll give it to ye. Take it, if ye would."

While saying so, Blonde Ponytail-chan handed me a piece of paper folded into quarters–

opening it up, it appeared to be a map of the Three Ouga Mountains.

No, more accurately, it was a map of the first two mountains of the three.

A map of Oniai Mountain and Senshin Peak.

Come to think of it, Master had told me that there were no real maps of Chattering Mountain, the final mountain–there probably weren't any details about it on the topographical map either.

Of course, even if it only described two of the mountains, obtaining a map I could actually use was the best thing I could possibly ask for.

"Thanks. Really saved me."

"'Tis nothing. Gotta help out a fellow mountain-lover–'tis important to help each other out, right. Ah, I suppose I'll also give ye this."

Blonde Ponytail-chan produced a bar of chocolate. An unopened bar of chocolate, small enough to fit in my palm.

"Food for the road. Don't turn it down–if I give this to ye, I've been promised two chocolate doughnuts. 'Tis a mutually beneficial deal."

Promised?

Promised, by whom?

I harbored some doubts, but I had no time to inquire about it–leaving me with a, "Farewell, then. Be careful now," she disappeared. It really was a magnificent style of departure; I could only describe it as "disappearing".

She looked so beautiful when she left.

While I was momentarily confused about the bar of chocolate in my hands, it almost seemed as if she'd melted away into my shadow–well, there's no way that's true.

Melting into my shadow, as if.

That's funny.

While thinking that she really seemed like a ninja despite being from overseas, I headed toward the mountains once again–the first of three, Oniai Mountain.

Maybe I'll get to meet a demon.(3)

004

"I'm not that much of an idiot."

I'm the type with confidence in my physical prowess.

Might even say I'm only confident in my physical prowess.

I've run a full marathon–I've even accomplished a 100-man kumite with more wins than losses at the dojo.(1)

I started karate in middle school, but ever since primary school I've been an active kid who likes playing outside. I've gotten involved in most of the major sports–with the exception of the ones with overly complicated rules, I've been good at them from the start.

So even though I knew perfectly well in my head that mountain climbing by yourself is dangerous and difficult, at some point, I started to take it less seriously.

I knew that perfectly well, but I got distracted.

It had seemed like I was prepared, but I should have seen it coming, since I'd ended up coming with a topographical map instead of a regular map.

Mountains, really, I'm just walking, aren't I!

I'm just moving my feet in order, aren't I!

…I wasn't taking it quite so lightly, but I just wanted to bathe in the waterfall as soon as possible; so, with no thought toward pacing myself, I started traversing the path in leaps and bounds.

Leap, leap, bound, bound.

Sloppily. Well, of course, since I'm on a muddy mountain, of course my feet will get sloppy.(2)

Only thinking about my destination–without thinking of what comes before.

I hadn't heard of it myself, but if foreign tourists, even people like that middle school girl were coming to climb this mountain, I assumed that at least among connoisseurs, Oniai Mountain was a safe, well-traveled mountain.

I'd thought about climbing by running, but even I could restrain myself from that–according to my original plan, my journey would only take one week at most.

Climbing too fast would be boring.

So I ought to keep some of my strength in reserve.

If I tripped and fell later, I wouldn't have a plan to deal with an injury–I'd been made to bring a first-aid kit just in case, but I could only give myself so much medical treatment alone.

So I followed the path up Oniai Mountain at a "bit of a quick pace"–forward, forward, up, up.

I willfully interpreted the name "Oniai Mountain" not as "Encountering Demons", but rather,

"Suitable for Beginners" (the possibility that it could mean "Suitable for Experts" carelessly slipped my mind).(3)

However, an opportunity to correct that idea came unexpectedly quickly.

"I don't think you have to worry too much about food. The land can supply most of your nutrition."

Since Master had said that, I'd assumed that there would be things like convenience stores and vending machines on my way up the mountain; however, when it was close to noon, I realized that I hadn't found anything of the sort.

Huh?

That's strange.

Or, is it?

Now that I realize, just what was I thinking, imagining convenience stores on a mountain–it's especially dubious to think that convenience stores boasted that level of franchising back when Master climbed this mountain.

Even vending machines would require electric power to operate–nevertheless, there hasn't been a single utility pole along this path!

There's not even a hint of electricity!

It'd be different if there were cables running underground, but it seemed it'd be fairly difficult to supply myself with food the way I'd assumed I could on this mountain.

This was still my first mountain, so on the third or fourth mountain, I'd be assailed by an even harsher food crisis–seriously?

Give me a break.

When I'm a woman who eats twice as much as other people.

And a kid who eats three bowls of rice.

Of course, I didn't come this far empty-handed–it's not like there's no food inside this sack I'm carrying.

I'm not that much of an idiot.

But all I'd brought was rice.

I'd only brought rice, along with a mess kit and portable gas burner for cooking it.

Makes my overly strong longing for mountain seclusion very plain and obvious.

But eating only rice is too stoic even for ascetic training.

Well, the most troubling problem isn't what I'll eat, but what I'll drink–the water bottle pressed to the side of my sack was incredibly tiny, almost an adorable size.

"The smaller size will lessen the burden, and it's convenient!"

That's how Tsukihi-chan kindly lent it to me, but to think it'd backfire like this–if only I could replenish the energy drink inside it at a coffee shop or something.

I shouldn't wish for a coffee shop when there aren't even convenience stores. Where the heck is my soy latte-latte.

"Think of this water bottle as me! Ufufu, you don't even have to be thank me!" Tsukihi-chan had proudly, quite quite patronizingly told me, but I began to doubt whether she did anything worth thanking at all. I even got the urge to hurl the bottle away and destroy the environment.

Well, considering the length of my itinerary, I don't think the water bottle being larger would make much of a difference; maybe it'd still be as useless as pouring water on a hot stone…

though I didn't even have enough water to pour on a hot stone anyway.(4) So just like that, my solo trip abruptly became stranded on a reef in a matter of life and death–I had no choice but to slow my pace.

If that's really the case, I ought to turn back here, firmly and prudently, but I couldn't do that–I hadn't yet faced myself.

That's me, Karen Araragi.

005

That said, it seemed like the water problem would work out one way or another.

Although I'm confident in my physical ability, I'm not so confident in my intelligence—but if you drive a human being into a corner, they get their head working as best they can.

So, without any self-confidence whatsoever, I put my head to work.

I ended up deviating a little from the mountain-climbing route, but it didn't take long to find a stream and spring water.

I followed the sound of water.

The blessings of Mother Nature.

I see; so that's what Master really meant by "procure from the land." With that, I'd managed to avoid dehydration and heatstroke for the time being.

Cool, delicious water!

This is the true thrill of mountain climbing!

Before I knew it, my highly simplistic mind had slipped into high spirits, forgetting my concerns from before—however, upon understanding the meaning of Master's words, a new problem arose to stand in my way.

Provisions.

If I was right about "procuring" something to drink from the land like this, then naturally,

"procuring" something to eat from the land would be no different—"procuring" food from the land.

I see, I see; so that's how it is.

I mean, I definitely saw some things.

I saw them.

On my path so far, I'd caught sight of squirrels, rabbits and other small animals—wow, that's a sight you can't see in the city; they're cute, I'd thought.

He he he, maybe it's cute and girly for me to think that small animals are cute, I'd thought.

…Am I supposed to eat those guys?

To supply my protein?

"……"

Well, as much as I'm proud of being a martial artist, Master, that's a bit of a rough task to put to high school girl living in modern times.

I'm not mentally prepared for that.

Being told to be self-sufficient is one thing, but ordering an unprepared person to carry out

"survival of the fittest" in a literal sense is just too hard of a mission, no matter how you slice it.

Of course, I'm probably being spoiled here.

Indulgent as sugary candy.(1)

Eating other living things is a regular, everyday occurrence—even the water I gulped down earlier would have had countless microbes in it.

And there's no way I didn't trample at least one ant just from walking this mountain path. So, it's not like Master was forcing such a cruel thing on me.

Master must have thought the phrase "procure from the land" was quite clear—I was just stupid.

She expected me to figure it out.

And while I'm grateful for that… It's weird for me to be talking pompously about preparedness and readiness to eat something—my struggle here just showed me how trivial my everyday lifestyle was.

Just showed me how superficial it was.

That's no good.

But limiting ourselves to the present scene, honestly, there was a more fundamental problem—

I'm just lacking overall.

In preparedness, readiness, and skill as well.

Even if I'm confident in my martial arts, that doesn't mean I have the expertise to catch a wild beast barehanded—and I didn't have the knowledge to lay traps, nor did I even bring a knife to prepare the beast for cooking.

Too empty-handed, even for a karate practitioner.(2)

Inside the open dojo would be one thing, but catching a wild animal on the side of a mountain, surrounded on all sides by trees… there's just no way I could do that. I tried my best, but even when I didn't restrict myself to animals, I couldn't even catch the fish swimming in the river.

I just got dripping wet.

My sweat was washed off, but it was a pointless waste of stamina—or even if it wasn't, I was still assailed by a sense of helplessness. To put it harshly, I wasn't yet in a position to even think about solving my food problem—or of carrying out "survival of the fittest".

That's me.

Self-sufficiency, huh.

That might actually be the more difficult task.

"Only those who have power can worry about whether or not to exercise it."

As if too late, I remembered something Master had told me—no, maybe that was a line from Nii-chan.

In the end, I had only rice for dinner.

The rice wasn't something I'd gathered myself.

I wasn't even the one who'd bought it.

006

I'm not good at cooking.

I never really did any at home—certainly never on the side of a mountain.

Just the practice cooking I did at school.

And in the Araragi household, we didn't have the type of family environment where we'd go camping during summer break—even less so after Nii-chan became a high schooler.

I'd never actually used the equipment I'd brought with me.

I'd thought that maybe I should bring rations that took less time and effort to prepare, but…

"That's no good! The atmosphere is important in mountain seclusion. Bringing the latest in cooking tools would ruin the mood!"

Tsukihi-chan had insisted.

"Don't worry, I'll give you a meticulous explanation of how to use a mess kit! Meticulous! The only thing I'll let you off not knowing is how to spell it!"(1) Tsukihi-chan, like me, hadn't been camping before, but in many ways cooking was my unexpectedly survivalist little sister's specialty.

My sister might be lacking in intelligence, but I get the impression she'd be a strong contender in a survival struggle.

I'm sure Tsukihi-chan could procure food from even a mountainside without much fuss—as the Fire Sister in charge of planning, maybe she could set some marvelous traps.

Anyway, following my little sister's instructions, I used the mess kit, the water I'd drawn from the stream, and the portable gas burner to cook the rice—it's just shameful, having such a tough time over something as trivial as this.

It's pathetic. Am I really this incapable of a person?

I wonder if this is what Master meant by "face yourself." Like, know the difficulty of living on your own… Or like, know what you are unable to do… But those seem like things I could learn without having to climb mountains and bathe in a waterfall.

I'd know if she'd have just told me verbally.

Well, I can't avoid mentioning how much rice I burned, and I honestly would rather not talk about a meal cooked with water that wasn't very tasty, so I'll spare you all of the details—but the smell produced when I cooked the rice was, somehow, not that bad.

I thought so myself.

As did the wild bears, it seemed.

"Wait. Beeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaars!?"

Even at a zoo, one of the things you simply must not do when you encounter a large predator is to panic and start yelling; though I'd known that beforehand, in the end having knowledge is different from putting it into practice, and actually seeing a bear before my very eyes, it was impossible for me not to scream.

I mean, they're goddamn massive.

Bears!

Nothing beats bears!

And these bears were in a group.

There were four of them.

No, wait, wait, this isn't a children's anime; are bears really herd animals? In any case I was ignorant on the subject (no situation would make you more ashamed of your ignorance than this), so I can't say for certain, but it doesn't really seem like they group up and form communities…

However, there is one exception.

Indeed—the case of parents and children.

From that point of view, the bear in the lead would be the mother, and the remaining three smaller (but still plenty big!) bears would be the children.

If they were humans, a mother accompanied by her three children would be a combination that'd give you a sense of security, a group that would make you feel warm and fluffy from seeing it, but because they're bears, things were utterly different.

A bear with her children.

Something one absolutely must not provoke.

That's a bit of miscellaneous common knowledge even an ignoramus like me would know.

And if they were lured here by the smell of my food, that means this family of bears was hungry.

It was the worst of the worst of the worst-case scenarios.

Even worse was the fact that there wasn't enough rice left in the mess kit for me to share with the bears—not even a single grain stuck to the side.

Do bears even eat rice in the first place? Were they just attracted by a nice smell as they went to catch fish?

…Well, whether or not bears ate rice was a secondary concern at the moment; the dangerous problem currently cornering me was whether or not bears ate humans.

Whether or not they preyed on humans.

The scene almost looked humorous, but it was a thoroughly serious one.

It couldn't be more serious.

In the martial arts world, not just in karate, you hear legends of so-called supernatural feats of victory in fights with large predators like bears and lions… but I couldn't even catch a squirrel.

There's no way I'd stand a chance against four bears.

I probably wouldn't be able to take on bears at a zoo, and these are wild bears.

In their natural habitat.

When I looked into the eyes of the bears as they looked at me, my fighting spirit, willpower, desire for battle, and my pride as a human being quickly vanished—even I was surprised.

Completely disappeared.

Those eyes were looking at a meal.

At prey—at food.

"Ah," I said, quietly understanding.

Decisively, I'd been taught the correct answer to the food issue that had been bothering me until now.

That is, an answer I still wasn't capable of thinking of, an unquestionable, obvious answer—in short, that humans are food too.

A natural result of "survival of the fittest"—of the food chain.

Linking and connecting.

A chain reaction of food with food.

"……"

I mean, it's not like I've achieved some kind of enlightenment and graciously want to fulfill my role as one part of the chain by getting eaten.

No way in hell.

I don't wanna die, and I don't wanna get eaten.

I haven't even crossed a single mountain yet, let alone bathe in a waterfall—Master is Master, but why didn't she let me know if there were going to be bears?

Or is it my fault for going off the path in search of water? Maybe it wasn't the bears who came after me, but me who trespassed in the bears' territory.

To think I'd encounter bears instead of demons…(2) I'd rather meet a demon!

"Dammit! If that's how it is, I've just gotta fight!"

"Are ye a fool? Ye don't 'just gotta fight'."

Steeling my stomach, I'd clenched my fists and was about to jump at the mother bear, when my feet rose into the air and I fell down.

It appeared I'd been suplexed by someone directly behind me—no, not suplexed.

If I got suplexed onto the ground of a scree slope covered in rocks, I'd die instantly.

That'd just make it easy for the bears to eat my smashed up, oozing brains. Why would someone deliberately make it easier for the bears to eat me?

"How annoying. They'd eat your steeled stomach too, you know. Anyway, at the very least, play dead."

With that retort, whoever it was right behind me released me from the suplex that they'd stopped just short of finishing—speaking of which, who was right behind me?

Who?

Looking up, I saw she had blond hair in a bun.

An older girl, around 20, sporting trousers.

"H-huh? Before, at the foot of the mountain, I met a girl who looked like a relative of yours."

"Ah. That's my cousin."

She declared—so powerfully there was questioning the declaration.

Well, their faces are built similarly, so it's probably true. Although, Blond Bun-san was about the same height as me.

Even if the appearance of bears was more than I could handle, for me to not only enter their attack range, but to try to do some showy pro-wrestling was a huge mistake—but somehow.

Somehow, I was saved—it seemed.

Just like I'd been saved by her cousin.

…Needless to say, trying a desperate suicide attack against wild bears was not within the bounds of sanity, even for me. I could only think that I'd lost my composure.

"Good grief. Getting attacked by bears on day one, you're just as much of a disaster magnet as your brother."

"Hm? Onee-san, do you know my brother?"

Blond Bun-san was silent for a little, then replied in a torrent of words.

"Hey now, if ye be hearing auditory hallucinations like that, perhaps ye haven't yet regained your sanity. There's no way a mountain climber ye came across on the side of a mountain would happen to know your brother. And 'tis even more ridiculous to think I've been ordered by your brother to lurk in your shadow and follow ye around."

Oh dear, she's entirely correct—well, if there's a beautiful foreign lady, the kind people become fascinated with against their better judgment, as well as four bears close by, most people wouldn't be able to keep their composure.

I mean, this isn't the time for composure!

I'm eternally grateful for her stopping me from thoughtlessly and rashly trying to battle a mother bear, but that doesn't mean the situation has been resolved—this is still a critical situation.

Far from it; the situation has gotten worse.

It's gotten worse and worse.

In a broad sense, me being attacked by a mother bear and her party that I'd invited by my own carelessness (I'd carefully doused the fire, but that had backfired, since wild animals are afraid of fire—as a former Fire Sister, it was an unthinkable oversight) could be explained away as reaping what I sowed; but my goodness, I'd ended up dragging a tourist into this mess who'd come all the way to Japan and just happened to be passing by!

I was overcome with a sense of duty to protect this girl no matter what.

Spreading my arms wide, I stood between the bears and Blond Bun-san.

"Run! I'll hold them back here!"

In my whole life, I never thought I'd be blessed with a chance to actually say a line like "Leave this to me, you go on ahead".

I even felt rewarded.

Well, in this case, the way in which I'd be "holding them back" was more like "getting eaten", so that expression wasn't exactly accurate(3)… But, anyway, I'll buy as much time as I can.

This isn't a matter of winning or losing… Hm?

Did Master tell me something like that?

Eh, this is no time to be thinking about that. I'm about to take on four bears; there's no time for thinking!

"Bring it on!"

I yelled, still unable to regain my composure.

Feeling my blood boiling hot, I fired myself up for the fight—but…

As I glared at them as if I could whack them just with my eyes, the mother bear and her party turned their backs on me, and started shuffling away dejectedly.

Calling them "dejected" is a bit euphemistic; actually, they were running away at full speed deep into the forest—all that remained of the bears' backs in my field of vision slowly disappeared into the empty space.

"H-huh?"

"Ka ka! Hey, bears are cowardly animals at heart, ye know. If a human makes a big fuss, that can be enough to drive them away;

'twould seem your angry yelling scared them off. That's by no means just my expert opinion."

Blond Bun-san laughed—an old-fashioned laugh.

R-right.

Now that you mention it, I may have heard somewhere that bears are cowards… But the idea that they won't approach humans when they're noisy and making a fuss, isn't that just before you get face to face with them?

If a bear is drawn to the smell of food and approaches you, then that doesn't apply anymore, or maybe, if you take use idea from the start, couldn't making a fuss actually end up backfiring?

Hmm, but, they did run away when I yelled.

Might be individual differences.

Can't talk about all bears like they're the same, huh.

To think my angry shout would have such power… Maybe my recent hard training had born even more fruit than I'd imagined.

I did achieve total mastery.

Or possibly excommunication.

"Well, be as careful as ye can on your way from here on—mm, I'm on my way back, so I can't go with ye, but I can grant ye this."

As if she was trying to wrap up the discussion about the bears running away as fast as possible, the older girl handed me a small object—what is this, a piece of candy?

I popped it into my mouth.

"Idiot!"

She slapped me.

Not only have I been suplexed by this strange person, but now slapped as well—huh? Does this mean I still haven't had nearly enough training? Or maybe this person does martial arts too?

She has a great figure, after all.

"Don't put anything and everything in your mouth! This is why ye get your teeth brushed by your brother!"

Hm? Did I tell her about that?

I must have told her earlier that I had a brother, so I suppose that's something that typically happens with brothers and sisters.

It certainly happens in the Araragi household.

It happens.

Anyway, because of the slap, I spat out the object in my mouth.

It wasn't candy.

It was a bell.

Not a handbell—a round bell.

"'Tis called a bear bell. Attach it to your bag. 'Twill jingle every time ye take a step, so it should discourage the bears."

Ah, I see.

There are some smart people in the world.

Whoever thought of this was a genius.

Since the motions of martial arts are drilled into the very marrow of my bones, naturally, I have a habit of moving not just without making the sound of footsteps, but without even the sound of rustling my clothes—but now I guess I have to do the opposite.

"And this as well. Even if ye attach the bell to your bag, bears might still come for ye—ye ought not be empty-handed."

I'd put down my bag for a moment to furnish it with the bell, as she'd instructed, when the next thing Blond Bun-san held out to me was a long, rod-shaped object.

"Do not swallow this, okay?"

'Cause you're not me.

I accepted that condition (the second part was rather cryptic—"'cause you're not me"?), but even if I hadn't been told, there's no way even I could swallow something that big.

What is it, a ski pole?

Even if it's not a "must" item for mountain climbing, it's a tool used by lots of people—you often see footage of mountain climbers on TV with canes in both hands, like they're skiing.

She's lending me one of those?

Or so I thought, but I was wrong.

It wasn't a ski pole—it was a naked Japanese sword.

007

After that, I encountered no trouble worth mentioning while traversing Oniai Mountain, the first of the Three Ouga Mountains.

Well, after going through the undoubtedly top-class experience of a sudden bear encounter while mountain climbing, something would have to be pretty bad to make it seem worth mentioning.

And after being looked at like a meal by that happy family, my food shortage stopped feeling like such a huge problem. I didn't lack for water, and I had more than enough rice in stock; what more could I possibly want?

Whatever it might be, it'd be the height of extravagance.

I'm fine just staying alive.

But although there wasn't any more trouble worth describing, it became clear that the trail up Oniai Mountain was a pretty harsh one.

My symbolic goal was bathing in a waterfall at the end, but I think Master intended for me to build mental discipline by sending me into the mountains—however, just climbing the mountains itself seems to provide plenty of training on the physical side as well.

Time to get into gear and climb this mountain on a handstand!

I want to feed that self of mine, who got worked up and said that kind of stuff, to a bear.

Or even to a squirrel.

I want to tell her, don't get carried away.

Know how blessed you are to even have paved roads.

Over time, I slowly understood how magnificent a thing it is for the ground to be level; and at the same time, although I'd thought that only beginners too hung up on equipment would use poles—despite being even less experienced than a beginner myself—I learned the value of the pole.

It was a Japanese sword, not a pole, but still.

A naked Japanese sword.

The thing Blond Bun-san gave me.

"The next time ye encounter a bear, have the guts to kill and eat it. If ye can do that, then not much harm should befall ye. Just carrying this around will give ye heart."

Even after being told, I thought that, unlike the map and the bell, it wasn't right for me to accept it just because it was given to me ("just carrying it around" seemed more dangerous than anything else), and I tried to refuse.

"Ye know, when you're not using it as a sword, ye can use it as a pole."

But with that, she forced it on me.

She's a pretty pushy person.

"Ye may be thinking that 'tis against your aesthetic as a karate artist to use a weapon, but being in the mountains without a knife of any kind is far worse."

Right, now that I hear it, that makes sense.

And I might be a karate artist, but it's not as though Master forbade me from using weapons.

The use of weapons is man's wisdom… huh?

…Did I tell her I was a karate artist?

"B-but, if you give this to me, will you be okay on your way down, Onee-san?"

"I'll be fine without that thing… I mean, with my abilities I can mass-produce those replicas… I really mean, I have a spare."

Oh, I see.

I don't really get it, but I see.

She's quite used to the mountains—she even has backups for her mountaineering tools. She's a lot more prepared than me.

So, I accepted her gift.

As a naive amateur, I accepted her gift.

I'm sure a kendo artist would get angry if they heard about me using a naked Japanese sword in place of a hiking pole; a sword wouldn't be my first choice for a pole, but beggars can't be choosers.

Actually, I'm glad I accepted it. I appreciated having a rod to lean part of my body weight on while crossing the mountain.

Because it was easy to use.

We got along super well.

Since it looked like a naked Japanese sword (and it actually was a naked Japanese sword), if I were to pass by another mountain climber I figured I'd need a pretty good explanation. But, fortunately, I hiked over the first mountain, Oniai Mountain, without so much as a "Hello!" to anyone besides Blond Bun-san—that is to say, without passing by anyone else.

Stage one, complete!

I'd thought it might more of a major mountain than I'd expected, as it had people coming from overseas, but it seemed more

like those two (uh, were they cousins?) were just experts and mountain fanatics.

After all, at several points along the way, there were rough spots where the mountain path all but disappeared; well, in any case, my first day was over.

Whew.

There were several unexpected incidents—or rather, almost nothing went "as planned"—but things came together in the end. Let's rest for the night and recharge our energy to take on the second mountain, Senshin Peak, tomorrow.

I took out my sleeping bag from my rucksack.

A bedroll, so to speak.(1)

I'd thought about bringing a tent, but that would increase my burden, and a tent is a bit much for one person, so I chose a sleeping bag instead.

I had my misgivings about whether or not I could sleep properly on the side of a mountain, but since I was tired out from walking from morning until night, I was actually able to sleep more soundly than usual. No time to appreciate nature, no time to take in the starry sky; I simply curled up and went to sleep atop the bare, scraggy earth.

I didn't even dream.

Nor did I encounter anyone.

008

Come to think of it, I ought to have worked out a plan for any bear encounters that might have happened while I was asleep—I mean, there were none, but I wouldn't have been shocked if there had been.

Not just bears.

I hadn't caught sight of any yet, but in such a densely forested area as this, there must be snakes, too; I would be utterly lost if I encountered a venomous snake. There's no hope for a cell phone signal this deep in the mountains—no way to call for a rescue.

Exhaustion had made me relax my guard. I've got to stay focused.

I washed my face and cleaned my body in a nearby stream (learning how blessed I was to have hot water), and looked out upon my second day, refreshed.

I think I cooked the rice better than I did yesterday.

Can get used to anything, I guess.

Though it wasn't clear whether I'd gotten used to the preparation technique, or just the taste.

So I'd thought the hike would have to be easier than yesterday's… but that was not to be.

That is to say, I'd forgotten something.

It had completely slipped my mind.

Three mountains comprise the Three Ouga Mountains—the second of those mountains, Senshin Peak, had a vastly different landscape compared to Oniai Mountain.

I had a preconceived notion that the name "Senshin Peak" meant that the trees on the mountain were mostly made up of conifers, but upon closer examination (I had done some preliminary investigation, but it had simply slipped my mind), I learned that the "shin" in

"Senshin Peak" did not refer to the needle-like leaves of conifer trees.(1) It'd sure be great if it did.

The "shin" in "Senshin Peak" referred instead to "rocks as sharp as needles". In other words, Senshin Peak was what they call a "rocky mountain".(2)

It was certainly no coniferous forest—there were hardly any trees growing at all.

As such, today's leg of the journey would seem to be more like rock climbing than mountaineering.

To traverse the rocks, I used three-point support(3) to crawl over their surface, which required me to have free use of both hands. As such, I unfortunately had to leave the Japanese sword I'd received from Blond Bun-san, which I was using as a pole, at the mountain's edge.

I'd wanted to tie it to my rucksack and take it with me, but it's a naked Japanese sword—if I fell over, it could very well cause a terrible tragedy… I've got to remember to retrieve it on the return trip.

There'll be bears on the return trip too, after all.

So, after burying the Japanese sword in a shallow hole I dug under a tree, I set out upon Senshin Peak. In simple terms of physical

effort, this one looked to be harder than yesterday's.

Could say that the level of difficulty went up on account of my progression to the next stage.

You need to use your whole body for rock climbing, and honestly, I hadn't brought enough rope

—once again exposing my lack of preparation.

However, unlike ordinary mountaineering, with which I had basically no experience, I had some experience with bouldering(4) and similar attractions as part of my training; as a result, I could keep a small degree of mental composure.

A little bit—but even so.

What I know is weapons and strength.

Tsubasa-san's line, "I don't know everything, just what I know," is modest and humble, but at the same time a brazen boast; I haven't seen her in a very long time now, but she'd probably

be able to succeed magnificently and without incident at this Zen dialogue-like problem of

"meeting yourself".

What I need right now.

Is to know myself.

To know Karen Araragi—hmm.

I still don't get it.

I'm just not seeing it.

By acting alone, with just my own strength to go on, in the wilderness, I'll get an opportunity to reexamine myself… If that was Master's intention in encouraging me to bathe in a waterfall, well, having come this

far, I could understand that. But it's not like I was born in a forest, and don't I want to live on a mountain either.

I don't think that clinging tightly onto these rocks represents my true self. My true nature is a girl who attends high school and takes classes, or maybe, a girl who attends a dojo and throws punches.

That's me.

I'm much closer to my true self when I'm messing around with my big brother or playing with Tsukihi-chan than when I'm fighting bears.

If I'm supposed to find myself…

I feel like I could do that at my house. No need to bathe in a waterfall deep in the mountains.

Well, no doubt I'm thinking these thoughts because I'm having a tough time rock climbing.

When you're weakened, your thoughts weaken too; I should come up with a reason to take a rest.

Thinking bad thoughts is no better than sleeping.

So, I should stop grumbling, shut up, and graciously take a rest.

I'll understand when I bathe in the waterfall.

I'll think of this as one of Master's trials for full mastery. I might not know myself, but I do know what kind of person Master is.

She doesn't lie, and she doesn't speak carelessly.

And she isn't someone who will tell you to do something you can't do—because Master instructed me to seclude myself in the

mountains, this harsh traversing is something I ought to be able to do.

She also told me to turn back if I couldn't do it… but setting that aside, I continued single-mindedly climbing Senshin Peak, clinging onto the bare rock.

Although I had more experience with this than yesterday's leg of the journey, I had no choice but to be careful, thinking of how unlikely I was to recover from making a mistake.

Falling onto sharp rocks would result in far worse injury than falling onto soft dirt. Concentrate, concentrate. I shouldn't let my mind wander.

On this mountainside, it's all I can do to stay alive.

Unbothered by any detours I had to take, I maintained the safest route I could, and aimed for the summit.

Considering how, if I were to get hurt, Master would also be implicated since she's the one who gave me instructions, it's really not just my own problem.

And for the sakes of the people who believed in me, I have to keep on living.

But even though I had every intention of being as careful as possible, there's a limit on what a person can do—that is to say, I could only get so much knowledge from imaginary training.

That, too.

Is a case of "I don't know everything, just what I know."

The bouldering you do indoors is not the same as rock climbing done outdoors. Of

course it isn't. But I had viewed them in the same light.

Careless as careless can be.

Um, what I mean to say is, this is outdoors, so of course there isn't any air conditioning, and there isn't a roof to block the sun.

No roof to provide shade.

As time passed, more and more brilliant light from the sun poured down from directly above me.

I'm not worried about sunburn, of course.

I have enough feminine sense to put on sunblock when going outdoors.

My body was slimy all over from the sunblock I borrowed from Tsukihi-chan.

That's not it—the issue was the bare rocks.

It was the rocks.

"So hot!"

Maybe the rocks had changed under the scorching light of the sun; the crevice I'd reached for felt as hot as a frying pan.

Hot enough to fry an egg.

Even a former Fire Sister couldn't withstand it.

Not only did I reflexively pull my fingers away, but my whole body recoiled as well. There was nothing I could do.

Trying to regain my balance made me lose my balance even more. Far from three-point support

—this was zero-point. A perfect score of zero points.

This is bad. I'll fall.

Onto a sharp mountainside, no less.

It's as if I'm falling into the Needle Mountain in Hell.(5) Senshin Peak.

It would be great if I could get away with just bone fractures. But I'm going to get skewered here.

It was absolutely not the time to be imagining that, but my body froze up; I don't have trypanophobia,(6) but for some reason, I got stuck in the phrase "stabbed by needles".

Both body and mind.

Got stuck.

O-oh.

Like a revolving lantern was flying around inside my head.

What is this feeling?

Is this how it feels to die?

No, no, it's too soon to feel like I've reached enlightenment—I'm not even halfway toward my goal of bathing in the waterfall, and moreover, I won't necessarily die from being skewered by a rock.

It could be worse than bone fractures, but not bad enough to kill me.

In the worst case, I'll be pierced somewhere in my torso; unable to move, but also unable to die quickly, I'll suffer unimaginably, my body will get roasted from the inside out from the heat of the sun-scorched rocks, and then I'll finally die… Ugh, my imagination is way too vivid!

Then.

"'Twill be dislocated!"

Immediately after hearing that voice, a sharp pain shot through my shoulder. With a crack, all of my body weight fell on my extended right arm.

I mean, it might not have been my shoulder that held up my whole body, but

rather my wrist; or perhaps it was a tiny palm, like an autumn leaf, that firmly grabbed my wrist.

A tiny palm.

The owner of the palm that caught me just after I fell was a little blond girl with a bob cut, who appeared to have been rock climbing while hidden in my shadow.

009

"I'm my cousin's cousin."

Blond Bob Cut-chan introduced herself like someone who couldn't think of many variations of a lie—but it's not good to suspect someone who saved your life.

It seemed her whole family had gone mountain climbing. I was concerned about whether it was alright for them to have split up from each other, but I suppose I have no reason to be worried about them when I'm the one constantly on the verge of disaster.

However, I got saved by a girl about ten years old… Besides, I had convinced myself that this path was difficult when even a ten-year-old could climb it, which was deeply embarrassing. To think I was about to fall off a path like that…

Disgraceful.

Acting like I knew what I was doing.

But I'm glad I'm alive, even in disgrace.

Blond Bob Cut-chan was wearing a kimono, like the ones Tsukihi-chan wears at home, so she almost looked like one of those yokai that live in the mountains. No matter how you look at it, that's not an outfit for mountain climbing—but, oddly enough, she wore it so naturally that there could be no doubting her.

"Hmm, I cannot get my age right. She may be my master's blood relative, but 'twould seem changing shadows is still somewhat impractical."

After muttering something I didn't understand—probably some overseas

cultural thing—Blond Bob Cut-chan looked up.

"Well, let me see your shoulder. I'll do some first-aid treatment. Don't worry, the injury doesn't look that bad. You'll be able to continue your climb."

She went to take off my jersey.

A little girl less than a third of my size was doing whatever she liked to me, but her attitude now was less antique and more haughty, and I didn't have the willpower to defy her.

After all, I had literally almost died.

I'd been close to death.

It was the first time I'd felt it so near.

I'd come here to face myself, but to think I'd confront death instead… no, maybe that was what Master had been trying to tell me. I don't think "go have a near-death experience" is the kind of instruction a master would give a student, though.

But if that's not it, then there's a good chance I'll have to return to town without carrying out her instructions.

Blond Bob Cut-chan had comforted me, but judging from the amount of pain, there was no doubt my shoulder was dislocated. The muscle on my elbow might be stretched to its limits; in this condition, I'll need to go to a hospital as soon as possible to receive appropriate treatment.

I had a similar experience in the past, so I understand. Unfortunately, it appeared my journey had to come to an end halfway through.

Halfway, like my half-assed preparation.

Anyway, we moved unsteadily but carefully across the rock faces to a place that was bare enough for two people to sit, and there I received Blond Bob Cut-chan's first-aid treatment.

"Now I'm going to push the disconnected joint back in. Ready, set…"

"Eeek!"

I thought that she'd ignored all established methods and thrust it in by force.

"Licky," the little girl said suddenly, licking my shoulder.

What's that about?

Does she think it'll get better if she licks it?

Maybe if it was a scratch, but this is a dislocation.

This is way too much to be explained away by cultural differences. I twisted around and tried to get away from Blond Bob Cut-chan…

"…Huh?"

But then I realized that the pain was rapidly decreasing.

"Huh? Huh?"

I tried rotating it around and around, but it was working like normal.

It felt perfectly fine.

Rather, it felt refreshed, as if the fatigue in the muscles I'd used for rock climbing so far had suddenly vanished.

What's with this invigoration?

"Ka ka. Looks like my 'pain, pain, fly away' worked."

I could only hear that as rather flippant, but even so, it was the truth that all the pain had flown away somewhere—my goodness, to think that a little girl's saliva held that kind of curative power…

No wonder Nii-chan is so obsessed with little girls.

That's why, huh.

This ought to be presented at a conference… No, it's probably just that the shock of nearly dying had exaggerated the pain, and I'm sure the shoulder was never dislocated in the first place.

The sanity I'd lost from the shock of nearly dying came back to me from the shock of being licked by a little girl, huh. The opposite of Nii-chan.

In any case, it looks like I'll be able to continue mountain climbing without being setback here.

That's good.

Good, or bad… I wasn't entirely sure.

I put my jersey back on and showed my gratitude to Blond Bob Cut-chan with a "Thank you!"

I wasn't just grateful for her first-aid treatment, but also for rescuing me when I was about to fall to my death.

"Oh, no problem. Raise your head."

I mean, I wasn't showing my thanks to the point of bowing, but… oh, well.

They say it's bad manners to tell a visitor from overseas, "Your Japanese is very good," but I can't imagine it's good etiquette to point out, "Your Japanese is weird," either.

"I will now take my leave. You've come about halfway to your destination, Ouga Falls. Good luck."

"Huh? Did I say that my destination was Ouga Falls?"

"Ye did," she vigorously asserted.

I see, I did tell her…

“Hmph. Seclusion in the mountains to face yourself… Well, that does sound like an idea those impudent humans would think of. And ‘tis certainly a necessary task. Especially for a reckless youngster like yourself.”

That’s some heavy stuff she’s saying.

For a ten year old girl.

…Maybe Blond Bob Cut-chan and her cousin had asked the whole family to come out here in order to face themselves by bathing in a waterfall.

“Uh… yeah… that’s right, that’s right. For a long time we’ve completely lost sight of what we are… So ye may very well meet more cousins of mine on the way forward.”

“I see… That’s a big family you have.”

“Hey. Take these with ye. They’re gloves. Should abate the heat somewhat,” Blond Bob Cut-chan said, and took out a pair of mountain climbing gloves from somewhere.

She handed them to me.

By any standards they were too large to fit her small hands, but I guess she had brought them for her relatives.

Anyhow, I was not in a position to refuse. I had just nearly fallen.

No choice but to accept them.

“Sorry, I have nothing to give you in return.”

“No, no, thanks to you, the variety of donuts I’ll get to eat keeps getting wider and wider.

Fresh-baked, ye know. I’m close to getting the full set, so if you’d like to have another crisis, I wouldn’t mind.”

Hrm. The jokes are pretty advanced overseas.

I have no idea what she meant.

All I could do was listen with a half smile.

"Now then, keep your health. …If ye do face yourself, try not to get into a fight."

Leaving those profound words with me, the little girl quickly stood up, and started to descend the path that I'd been climbing. Since I felt like I hadn't thanked her enough, I tried to stop her in the spur of the moment, and followed after her.

"?"

But there was no sign of Blond Bob Cut-chan on the other side of the rock.

I don't suppose she fell.

010

I looked down, but saw no signs of Blond Bob Cut-chan; so, concluding that she was just an expert rock climber, I decided to press forward. Thanks to the gloves she gave me, it went smoothly from then on.

It was smooth sailing.

There were still a few close calls after that, of course, but I barely overcame the situation without things getting serious, and successfully traversed both the first and second of the Three Ouga Mountains, Oniai Mountain and Senshin Peak.

Stage two, complete!

Because of how tough it had been, my feeling of accomplishment was so great that I almost felt like I could turn back right there; I started feeling like I'd already learned what I was supposed to learn. I did have a life-threatening experience, after all.

Is there anything more for me to learn?

Maybe I've been released.

But turning back after finishing two thirds of the journey would be rather regrettable. I managed to not get a dislocation, so I really ought to follow this through to the end.

Rocks couldn't stick me through—I'll stick to my purpose!(1)

…Setting aside whether or not I could express it so cleverly, I renewed my determination, and got past my second night.

Before all that stuff like total mastery and facing myself, I just wanted to finish what I'd started.

Like, can I come this far just to quit?

But, nevertheless.

It was good that their family of mountaineers so happened to have come here all together from overseas, but I wonder how I'd have ended up if they hadn't been here.

It didn't seem like there were any other mountain climbers here, either…

Well, I don't know where I might have failed (I might have panicked when I couldn't read the topographical map at the entrance to Oniai Mountain, and gone back there, unhurt), but I have no doubt I would have been unable to achieve my goal of bathing in the waterfall.

If so, it would mean Master overestimated me when she said I could reach Ouga Falls.

That makes me feel pretty ashamed.

Even embarrassed.

Or maybe it's unrelated to being able or unable?

She said that winning and losing weren't important.

I still don't really get it.

Even if I felt like I understood it, I'm sure that would just be my imagination.

Could even call it a delusion.

Nii-chan might understand.

Nii-chan and Master have completely different ways of life and ways of thinking, but I think they're alike in not placing much importance on winning and losing.

Though, in Nii-chan's case, it's more like he thinks losing is winning—I wonder.

Since Master never said I had to make it to Ouga Falls on my strength alone, me being saved by a party from overseas wouldn't

make this training meaningless. But from here on out, I thought, even if I encounter a cousin's cousin, or even a cousin's cousin's cousin, I want to make it through without causing them any trouble.

011

The third of the Three Ouga Mountains—the final mountain, Kachi-kachi Mountain.

Hearing that name brings to mind the famous mountain from that folktale about the rabbit and the tanuki—it probably wasn't the official name, but rather a nickname.(1) Long ago, it used to be a volcano. There didn't seem to be any risk of eruption now, but when I heard about that, as a former Fire Sister, it lit a spark inside me.

Sparked and flared up.

But although the spark was lit, and although just last night I had vowed to make it through this alone, on the morning of my third day, I suddenly ran into difficulties.

A bigger problem than the question of what kind of mountain Kachi-kachi Mountain was.

When I opened my rucksack to cook the day's portion of rice, the rice was all gone.

All that was left was an empty bag.

Huh? Did it get eaten by a bear while I was sleeping?

I was still haunted by that trauma from my first day… But if a bear had actually come up to me while I was sound asleep, I'm sure it would have eaten me instead of the rice.

There were wild animals besides bears I might have suspected, but I doubt a wild animal would have left behind a clean, empty bag after eating the rice. If the culprit were a wild animal, it stands to reason that it would have torn apart the bag with its fangs.

If so, then why?

Did I drop it somewhere?

Had I fastened the bag too loosely, and come all this way scattering the rice behind me like Hansel and Gretel? … Looking back, there didn't appear to be any traces of that.

Which would mean, most likely, that it had all spilled out when I nearly fell from the bare rocks during yesterday's rock climbing—that's all I can think of.

If that's the case, then I ought to say it's fortuitous that the rice was the only casualty.

Just the fact that I escaped with my life was unbelievably good fortune—but a chill runs down my spine to think that I might have lost all of my already insufficient equipment.

Well, losing my food supply at this point is a fairly serious issue, even on its own… I suppose the wildlife would have eaten the rice if I'd scattered it around.

This is a problem.

A huge problem.

This lifestyle of cooking the day's portion of rice in the morning, making it into onigiri, and eating it throughout the day had quickly come to an end; that is to say, I was at a loss for what to do from now on.

But my only option was to keep going forward—I couldn't use my food situation as a reason to turn back.

Why? Because turning back would require me to spend a whole day crossing the second mountain—the rocky mountain—Senshin Peak.

There would be no way for me to acquire food while rock climbing.

So my best bet was to press on, climbing Kachi-kachi Mountain while procuring food from the area.

Fortunately, though I had nearly no prior knowledge about it (even Master hadn't told me very much), as far as I could see, Kachi-kachi Mountain was similar to the first mountain.

Of course, I'd left behind the knife (Japanese sword) that I'd received, but even if I had it with me, fatigue had been steadily building up, so there was no way I could catch a wild animal.

But plants?

Plants can't run away.

They won't eat me (more importantly).

It even seemed strange that on Oniai Mountain I never entertained the thought of gathering mountain vegetables to use as side dishes.

…It's not strange at all, actually.

It's because I don't like vegetables.

All I eat is meat—I'm carnivorous woman, in the literal sense.(2) For now, let's set aside the argument that eating plants amounts to murder since they're living things like us—I'm not in a place where I can give that argument much consideration.

I'll never say spoiled things like "I hate vegetables" again—please forgive me.

The possibility of an accident had become increasingly serious. For me to eat, that is, for me to survive, it seemed my only choice was to ascend the third mountain, Kachi-kachi Mountain.

And so, my third day begins.

012

Although my climb up Kachi-kachi Mountain had met with failure at the very start, naturally, the mountain itself was no laughing matter either.

As it simply couldn't compare to rock climbing, the atmosphere felt similar to that of the first mountain, but the degree of difficulty was incomparable—I climbed the trail up Oniai Mountain with relative ease thanks to the pole (Japanese sword) I had, but Kachi-kachi Mountain didn't even have a trail to begin with.

Nothing that even resembled a path.

There was nothing printed on the map.

Even in the ordinary act of climbing, I had to climb as if I were stranded—all I could rely on was the slope of the ridge, and a mountain stream.

I somehow inferred that this stream was connected to a waterfall near the top of the mountain, i.e., Ouga Falls.

So even in the worst case, as long as I keep following this stream, I'll reach my destination eventually—I wasn't sure whether that was a correct method of mountaineering, but it was the smartest thing I could think of.

It's very sad that this inefficient method was the best I could come up with, since I'd always left the thinking to Tsukihi-chan; but even so, coming up with something myself and then acting on it myself gave me a sense of fulfillment, or rather, motivation.

It made me feel alive.

Maybe it's thanks to that motivation that I could press on through this life-or-death situation of not having any food without my spirit breaking—I even thought of something magnificent like, what was it… it's fun just being alive.

Just being alive can be painful too, I suppose.

Well, at the very least, it must be correct to ensure I always had a source of water while traveling; however, I had to keep in mind that this wasn't an entirely safe route, since wild animals—bears, first and foremost—would come here to drink water as well.

Also, I ought to stay aware of some important points like not slipping on wet stones and not tripping in mud, though those are just fundamentals.

I'd taken two largish sticks that had fallen nearby and was using them as poles. The single Japanese sword was easier to use, despite being a pole substitute too; but, well, I can't act spoiled.

If I'd eventually find my way to Ouga Falls by climbing along this stream, then if I stop and bathe in the water here, I might be able to say that I'd achieved my goal in a broad sense;

nefarious thoughts like that pervaded my mind, but if the self that I finally met after traversing two and a half mountains was such a coward, then I could never face my family, let alone Master.

Nothing would be so idiotic as not being able to meet anyone else as a result of meeting myself—so I'll keep aiming to reach my goal.

I'll keep traversing.

At the same time, I can't neglect foraging for food, either.

Having come this far, finding food is more important than keeping to my schedule; there isn't much that's more important than your life.

Even if, in the worst case, I have to revise my plan of action, I need to prioritize procuring food from the land… But I mustn't forget, the more I prolong my stay in the mountains, the worse the food problem will become. There's no such thing as a day a human is fine without eating.

If I'd brought a canoe, the way back would be a piece of cake—but at this point, I shouldn't be worrying about the return trip.

I don't know whether the volcano was dormant or extinct, but considering the Kachi-kachi Mountain's origin, I don't suppose the soil is very suitable for farming; I couldn't find any fruits or vegetables or mushrooms that I recognized.

That's strange.

Just where, and how, are the cabbages and apples and bananas?

013

Even if any of widely-known, prominent plant foods were growing deep in the mountains, they probably wouldn't taste very good.

After all, the vegetables sold in supermarkets and stuff are raised with people's assistance in order to make them easy for people to eat.

The more I think about it, the more profound my dietary problem seems.

But that was a rather shallow concern—I was in no position to worry about taste or ease of eating; I was in a state of extreme hunger, and I just wanted to put something in my belly.

Having said that, I had eaten yesterday, so even if I missed breakfast, I thought I'd be able to make it to midday at least, but there was no way.

I wasn't gonna last that long.

Couldn't I just eat some of these weeds around here… I'd heard that a lot of grasses are edible, after all.

And they say there's no such thing as a weed.

If I boiled them using the mess kit, which no longer had a purpose due to the loss of the rice, maybe they wouldn't turn out all that bad…

Or so I thought… well, I'm not sure whether I was thinking or not, but anyway, I staggered toward a nearby thicket and reached out my hand—

"…Why are ye deliberately reaching for a poisonous plant?"

Something firmly grabbed my wrist.

Deja vu.

My wrist was grabbed this same way yesterday, when I was about to fall off the rock face—oh, is it that little girl again? I looked to my side; right next to me was a blond-haired mountain climber, and she was not a little girl.

She looked like a high school girl, and was wearing twintails—well, the definition and age of a high school girl aren't the same overseas as they are in Japan, so I can't say for certain, but in any case, the blond girl looked to be of my generation.

"I cannot lick a rash. That would be awful for my tongue."

It sounded like Blond Twintail-chan knew that Blond Bob Cut-chan had licked my shoulder—I wonder, do they have family telepathy or something?

Tsukihi-chan and I definitely don't have anything like that.

Well, I was in no condition to be thinking logically, so I'm not sure I'd heard Blond Twintail-chan correctly; maybe, as a mountaineer and lover of mountains, she was just telling me to take the mountain seriously.

For sure, brashly going around picking up wild plants is way too desperate—if I'd really gotten a rash as result, it would be no laughing matter.

"So… um…"

"I'm a cousin."

…Well, I suppose she would be.

Just how big is this mountain-climbing family?

They're really scattered around too, considering that.

And did they not have a single lecturer to teach them modern Standard Japanese?

"Did my cousin not tell ye to not put anything and everything in your mouth?" Blond Twintail-chan said, yanking my lethargic wrist away from the thicket (the poisonous thicket).

She looked frustrated, as if it were her own warning that I'd ignored. I guess she has a high level of empathy for her cousin.

But, did someone tell me that?

I didn't remember at all.

"That's probably just an issue with your memory, but I'll chalk it up to ye hitting the wall; how about ye remember something else, then. Did a noble and kind mountaineer not provide ye with a ration?"

Oh.

I remembered.

I mean, how could I have forgotten about that until now? It was just two days ago, but it felt like it happened two years ago.

That's right; at the foot of Oniai Mountain, the first of the Three Ouga Mountains, I received a bar of chocolate from Blond Ponytail-chan.

Chocolate! Calories!

Uhh, where is that thing, again?

Oh, right, I'd put it in the pocket of my jersey and left it there, hadn't I?

Pondering what I'd do if I'd lost that too, I groped around in my pocket—the pocket

didn't have a zipper, but luckily, the chocolate was still there.

Its shape was warped, as if after two days of scorching heat it had melted and rehardened, but that hadn't changed the taste very much.

"Chomp. Crunch, crunch… Oh, I can feel it! I can feel the polyphenol!"

"Ye have quite the sensitive tongue if ye can feel the presence of polyphenol."

After exasperatedly telling me to wait, Blond Twintail-chan went back to the thicket.

She didn't go very far away, keeping about as far from me as my shadow went; I wondered if she'd dropped something.

As I stood there absent-mindedly (one bar of chocolate just isn't enough to make my head start working again), Bond Twintail-chan returned to me with her hands full of herbs—an herb bouquet.

"Here. I've picked ye some herbs that are alright to eat."

"You're so kind!"

I hugged Blond Twintail-chan.

I demonstrated my gratitude in an un-Japanese-like way toward a tourist from overseas who was overly close to me.

"I've decided, you'll be my partner for prom!"

"There's no such thing as prom in Japan."

"You're an angel! No, a goddess!"

"Ah, stop, stop. If you call me an angel or a goddess, something really bad might show up."

She'd dropped her antique manner of speaking.

Something really bad?

What's that?

"I'll cook these right away! You eat some too!"

Even if I said "cook", I'd just be boiling them using my mess kit, but I'd gotten all hyped up from getting some of the food I was so desperate for, so I invited Blond Twintail-chan to lunch.

"My apologies; I must reject your invitation. I cannot eat things that sprout up from the ground."

I was curtly rejected.

My feelings of gratitude started to dwindle.

And what a harsh rejection it was.

If that's the case, I wonder why she knows so much about which wild plants are edible and which are poisonous.

"Well, due to personal circumstances, I'm finicky about food. Or perhaps 'twould be better to say there's a guy close to me who's finicky about food—ka ka."

After that enigmatic declaration, Blond Twintail-chan let out a loud, yet somehow self-deprecating laugh.

"As such, I cannot partake of the meal, but I suppose I can at least sit with ye."

She plomped down next to the gas burner I was getting ready—she was sitting with one knee raised, and I could hardly call it good manners; even so, she somehow engendered a sense of nobility.

Maybe more like divinity than nobility.

Oh, sorry, I'm not supposed to call her a goddess, right? Why is that?

"Eh? What?"

“Oh, um… Right. I was just thinking, they say there’s a god in the mountains, don’t they.”

Questioned, I replied vaguely.

That was too vague.

But I had certainly heard something like that before—it’s definitely not that I’d mistaken a tourist from overseas I’d happened to come across in the mountains for a god.

But it’s the truth that I’d received considerable help from this Blond Twintail-chan, as well as from her whole blond family.

At this point, even a careless girl like me will start feeling like it’s passed beyond chance and coincidence and into the realm of divine intervention.

“Hmph. A mountain is just a mountain. There’s no god in it.”

Blond Twintail-chan was resolute.

It appeared her sense of piety was not very strong.

“Though, 'tis indeed a mystical place. That may be the crux of the matter—but for me, 'twas the exact opposite.”

“? The exact opposite?”

“For me, 'twas a lake—well, that’s an old tale. There seems to be a tendency in this country to regard natural phenomena as gods, and a tendency to regard them as monstrous apparitions as well—to revere nature, to fear nature. And thus, oddities are born; though perhaps, in truth, oddities can only exist within the hearts of people.”

“? ? ?”

I’d completely lost track of what she was talking about—it’s pretty embarrassing to be

taught Japanese culture by someone from overseas, but since she's a mountain fanatic who's sightseeing this deep in the mountains, maybe it'd be weirder if she didn't have any personal opinions about mountains.

Oddities, huh.

But, thinking it'd be rude to listen in silence to the person who saved my life, I interjected.

"Is that like the expression, 'suspicion begets monsters'? Like, demons are born inside a suspicious heart."

As I was talking, I felt like my interjection had completely missed the point, but whether out of self-importance or generosity, Blond Twintail-chan agreed.

"Well, something like that. Demons are born in one's heart, and live in one's shadow—though, I expect the demons I'm talking about are different from the demons of this country. But ye might say 'tis that difference which makes humans so interesting. So, how about it?"

"? How about what?"

"Enough of gods and demons—have ye met yourself yet? Your journey is nearly in sight of its goal."

"Ah…"

Huh?

Did I mention that my goal was to have a dialogue with myself? Well, if she knows, then I must have mentioned it. That's no good; looks like my brain's still in "hit the wall" mode.

"Can't say I've met myself yet. I'm doing my best just to stay alive—I guess I won't be

able to tell until I actually bathe in the waterfall."

"Doing your best just to stay alive, eh. That can be an enviable state of affairs; there are people vexed by not being able to die, ye know."

"Really? There are people like that?"

"Ye could say there are, and ye could say there aren't. Could say the same about them being alive or dead, too. Look, 'twould seem the herbs are cooked. Time to eat."

"Oh, right. Thank you for the meal."

Thus prompted, I scooped the wild plants directly from the mess kit into my mouth.

Hhmm, I suppose you could call it a vegetable soup—but to be frank, you definitely could not call it tasty.

Either it was tasteless, or bitter; maybe I boiled it for too long, but it had absolutely no consistency—it even felt a bit like I was eating poison.

I very much doubted the idea that hunger is the best seasoning, contrary to what you might expect—but I mustn't act spoiled. This was what Blond Twintail-chan gathered for my sake (although, she'd refused to ingest it).

Nourishment, nourishment, nourishment.

Life, life, life.

Repeating those words in my mind like an incantation, I stuffed the wild plants down my throat.

I needed to eat sufficiently in order to reach my goal, which, according to Blond Twintail-chan, was already in sight.

"Try to remember the look of these plants. From here on, pick them up whenever ye see them; they ought to be growing on the first

mountain as well, so ye can use them as food on the return journey."

"Thank you for everything."

"No need to thank me. Now then, 'tis time to take my leave."

Blond Twintail-chan abruptly stood up.

Somehow or other, after eating the bar of chocolate and the wild plants, my head had started working again to some extent. I became intrigued, and asked, "Hey, just how many of you are there?"

I'd already seen one, two, three, and including Blond Twintail-chan, four members of her family on my journey so far.

The third, Blond Bob Cut-chan, had warned me that I might meet more of them on my way—

one had already rescued me—but they always appear so suddenly, so it startles me every time.

It's bad for my heart.

So it was more than simple curiosity that made me want to know, a bit more specifically, where and who they might be, if I'm going to meet another member of her family; I wonder.

Are there still a bunch of blond, golden-eyed cousins making their way down the mountain, or is this Blond Twintail-chan bringing up the rear?

Her answer to my question was, "Let's set aside how many people I've come with—how many have ye come with?"

She asked me the same question.

Isn't it obvious how many people I'm with? As I struggled to respond, Blond Twintail-

chan flashed a smile that was far from angelic—it was demonic.

"Surely ye don't think you've come alone, do ye?"

014

Well, of course I thought I came alone.

Because I did come alone.

That's what I'd thought I ought to do, and I doubt I could call it mountain seclusion if I didn't—I thought it was necessary for me to attempt this dangerous thing on my own.

If I'd wanted to, I could have invited friends from school or companions from the dojo, and if I'd asked Master for permission, I don't think she'd have refused.

This was my decision.

I decided by myself.

I didn't care about Nii-chan's opposition or Tsukihi-chan's support, and they had no influence on my decision—Karen Araragi decided everything by herself.

Or am I wrong?

From the outside, does it look like I blindly trusted Master, rebelled against Nii-chan, got urged on by Tsukihi-chan, and went off a journey I didn't really understand without any self-awareness or agency of my own?

Do I lack a self?

Do I lack my own person?

Thinking about stuff like that, I climbed further up Kachi-kachi Mountain—it was more akin to stream climbing than mountain climbing, but anyway, it appeared I had recovered mentally (if not physically) by putting something in my belly.

Blond Twintail-chan had disappeared in the blink of an eye; maybe, in the brief moment I'd hung my head at her baffling

question, she'd taken off down the river at full speed.

But if so, why would she run so fast?

Once again, my insides burned with the feeling that I hadn't thanked her enough—should I have asked for her contact information?

Well, if I meet another cousin of theirs on my way, I'll be sure to convey my gratitude for everything then.

While thinking, I tried to move my feet forward, one step and a time—these mountains, however, were truly merciless.

They're not easy, and they're not kind.

In particular, the third mountain, Kachi-kachi Mountain, was so inhospitable that it seemed to be rejecting any and all human intrusion.

Mountain weather is fickle, they say.

Even I could anticipate that rain would fall at some point on my journey; that's why I'd put rain gear in my bag.

I made sure I hadn't dropped it.

Besides, the reason I came here in the first place was to bathe in a waterfall, so even a torrential downpour would be no big deal.

However, the mountain went beyond my expectations.

It wasn't extreme rain.

Certainly not a thunderstorm.

The crisis that confronted me wasn't something flashy like that—rather, it closed in on me gently and quietly, and the next thing I knew, I was completely surrounded.

Saying I was surrounded might give off the impression I was surrounded by wild animals

or something, but in this case, I was not surrounded by living things—but by mist.

Mist.

I think it's called "gas" in mountain lingo, but no matter what you call it, it turned my whole field of vision pure white. I'd been watching my feet so as to avoid slipping, which had backfired completely; it was just as if I'd strayed into a cloud.

Stuff like this can happen?

I was dumbfounded.

It was, needless to say, a fairly dangerous situation, but I was overcome by the feeling of being absolutely overwhelmed.

Is mist something you can see so clearly? I'd thought it was at most something that faintly blurred your field of vision.

The whole landscape is just about painted over!

By pure white.

Well, of all the mists that assail people in the mountains, I suppose this dense fog is one of the thicker kinds, but still, I could only see what was directly below me; even a landscape covered in snow isn't as white as this.

The path before me was dark—no, the path before me was white.

As an amateur, I had trouble deciding whether the dense fog would clear up if I just waited where I was, or whether I ought to move quickly to escape it.

The mist felt like a nightmare.

In simple terms, since the place I was walking lacked decent footholds and my field of vision had been impeded, staying still might seem like the best plan; however,

there's no doubt the situation would get worse if it persisted—if I can't see anything, then I can't procure any wild plants to eat.

If this were the dark of night, I could assure my safety with fire, but although my field of vision is just as restricted inside this white mist, fire wouldn't clear anything up; it might just make me damp.

Basically, if I choose to wait, I may very well end up hitting the hunger wall again. If all else fails, I could eat some wild plants raw, and if that's my best option in the circumstance then I ought to do so without hesitation… but it's still risky.

Well, there aren't any no-risk or low-risk options in this situation—whatever I do, I'll be gambling with my own life.

Could this be yet another part of "facing myself"?

Anyway, I chose to keep following the stream upriver within the dense fog, using my ears to guide me. It's all right; I've been trained in fighting while blindfolded.

That was all in the dojo, though…

Actually, the mountain had more sounds to guide me than the dojo did.

Gotta focus, more than ever before, to avoid tripping… Calm down. Even if there were bears or boars living on this mountain, they're probably laying low inside this mist.

Forcing myself to relax, I kept moving, carefully gripping the poles I'd made from tree branches.

015

Kachi-kachi Mountain.

Third of the Three Ouga Mountains, Kachi-kachi Mountain.

I used to think its name came from that folktale, and I doubt that's completely wrong, per se. I think that's definitely the origin of the name—however, it's not the whole story.

I became convinced there was a different, bigger reason why it came to be called that.

Kachi-kachi.

Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi.

Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi.

Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi.

Pushing myself forward within the dense fog, even as I had no idea where I going, I heard that sound—that's when I became convinced.

…In the folktale, the rabbit strikes a flint in order to set fire to the brushwood that the tanuki is carrying, and the sound the flint makes is "kachi-kachi"; that's why the mountain is named

"Kachi-kachi Mountain".

In one variation, the name becomes "Roaring Mountain" after the fire is lit, I think—in that case, perhaps in the future Kachi-kachi Mountain will be called Prickly Mountain.

Kachi-kachi.

Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi.

Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi.

Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi.

I knew that sound.

I knew it, for some reason.

Even though I had never faced this situation before, I was still fully aware that this was an alarm sound.

The sound of an alarm—kachi-kachi.

A warning sound—kachi-kachi.

That's right.

This was the sound of that insect.

The insect that usually tops the list of risks humans encounter in the mountains.

The little bug that kills more people than bears do—

"Giant hornets…"

I let out my voice.

Well, I couldn't even let out any air, to say nothing of a voice—the muscles of my face were totally frozen.

I'm scared.

Intense fear dominated every inch of my body and mind.

"……"

Any book about mountain climbing will inevitably discuss giant hornets—how they're so savage and ferocious that they'll attack any human who enters their territory with their poison stingers.

Unlike honeybees, giant hornets can use their stingers as many times as they want; if you crouch down or something when you get stung, they'll gang up and sting you full of holes like a honeycomb (ironically enough).

But that doesn't mean you can just run away.

Sometimes a swarm of giant hornets will make a warning sound before they attack.

Like, kachi-kachi.

By doing so, they determine whether the thing that violated their territory is an invader or not, or something like that—if you stay perfectly still, they might let you go, if you're lucky. So I've heard.

If you run, of course, they'll pursue you. There's really no correct choice in this situation.

The correct choice would have been to not enter any territory likely to contain giant hornet nests… It's too late for that.

I made a mistake.

Where are they?

Was I wrong to move in this dense fog? Or was this whole mountain-climbing thing ill-advised to begin with? I was assailed by an assortment of regrets.

Like being stabbed by needles.

Tormented by prickles.

…My imagination was very scary.

Since I couldn't see them, only sense their presence through sound, the image of me being encircled by giant hornets loomed large in my head—I started thinking that thousands of giant hornets were after me, even though there's no way that could be the case.

No good. I can't keep standing here.

I can't stay still in this situation.

However, my feet were frozen, and I couldn't run away. I'd gotten all fired up and ready to throw myself at those bears… But doing the same thing to bees was entirely out of the question.

What do I do?

I was about to start crying.

I felt sick.

My head hurt.

I was sweating.

Nauseated.

I couldn't breathe.

…I stopped being capable of continuous thought. Was I in the throes of altitude sickness?

Right here, right now?

The conclusion I came to in my state of disarray was "follow the sound of water and jump into the stream". Even the militarily organized hornets wouldn't follow me into the water. It made no difference to me whether I got away safely by jumping into the stream or not; I didn't care if I drowned, or got swept away, or had a heart attack from the coldness of the water, or crashed into rocks or the riverbed.

Kachi-kachi.

Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi.

Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi.

Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi. Kachi-kachi.

If I just didn't have to hear that sound anymore—

"Listen!"

Someone firmly grabbed my shoulders from behind.

Because they were directly behind me, and the fog was so dense, I couldn't see what they looked like—I didn't know what color their hair was, or what kind of hairstyle they had.

But someone was there.

I heard their voice—and for some reason, it brought me immense relief.

All at once, I felt the strength leave my body.

“Listen—listen up. Do you think giant hornets would be flying around in this fog?”

Oh.

Now that you mention it, that makes sense.

Just like bears and boars, there’s no way giant hornets would be active in this dense fog either

—I don’t know how good insects’ eyesight is, but setting aside stuff like contrast and perspective, all eyeballs are equal before the mist.

So this isn’t a warning sound?

This isn’t the sound of giant hornets coming to sting me—was it a sound to lure me into a predicament?

Was it a sound my own weakness made me hear?

Was it a message from myself to myself?

“I’ll guide you. Move forward.”

Whoever it was behind me gave me a shove, still holding my shoulders. My weakened body obeyed, and moved up the slope.

I could still hear the “kachi-kachi” sound.

But it was rapidly getting softer.

It was fading away.

I could hear it less and less.

“Follow the path forward.”

All I could hear was that voice from right behind; it felt like the air had cleared, and I wasn’t scared anymore.

Not because someone was helping me.

Because from that point on, I moved forward of my own volition.

Along the path.

Even if there was no trail to follow, I moved forward along my own path.

016

As soon as I came out of the fog, I was at Ouga Falls.

It was abrupt, as if I'd suddenly arrived at the end of the line. My third day was nearing its end, and the evening sun was already sinking beyond the mountain ridge—even that light was blinding to me right then.

I had probably crossed the tree line at some point; my field of vision opened up, and a sublime, red view spread out before me, soaking into every corner of my utterly exhausted body.

I'd turned back to look for the person who supported and encouraged me in the dense fog, but they had long since disappeared—though I'd wanted to convey my gratitude to all the cousins.

"Ah…"

But this was no time to lose strength and collapse onto the ground. This was my destination, but you might say I'd finally arrived at the starting point.

I hadn't come to climb a mountain, I came to bathe in a waterfall.

Ouga Falls was not the gigantic waterfall that I'd vaguely assumed it would be—to be quite frank, I felt a bit disappointed.

It put a damper on my sense of accomplishment.

By the way, I had assumed it would be like Niagara Falls, which I saw featured on TV before, but… well, thinking logically, if I bathed in a waterfall of that scale in my current condition, I wouldn't just die, my

body would get smashed to pieces. Not only would I be unable to meet myself, my corpse might not even be able to meet my bereaved family.

Besides, although Ouga Falls was smaller than I imagined in terms of size, in terms of height, it seemed rather on the tall side for a Japanese waterfall—that is to say, the difference between the top and bottom was really impressive from up close.

From what I could estimate by looking, the current seemed to tumble down from a height of at least fifteen meters. Of course, neither its height, nor its width, nor its force could hope to match Niagara Falls, but considering how I'm about to bathe in it, I guess I still need to rouse my spirits again.

Well, I'd made it past bears, succeeded at rock climbing, overcome hunger, advanced through dense fog, and defeated giant hornets—having come this far, it wouldn't do to be daunted by bathing in a waterfall.

I could have planned to bathe in the waterfall tomorrow, after eating dinner (boiled plants) and getting a good night's rest, but I decided to make hay with the time left in the day.

I mean, setting aside how I felt about the waterfall, practically speaking, I was burning up inside my clothes and shoes after traveling through the mist, so I also wanted to bathe in the cold water to refresh myself.

Going swimming when I was supposed to be bathing in a waterfall was fairly unscrupulous as far as training goes—but, well, I think I deserved a reward was for escaping that dense fog.

As though I were going to take a bath before a meal, I pulled out my karate uniform from my bag—come to think of it, stuffing this thing first into the bottom of the bag probably made packing difficult, and may very well be the reason why I didn't bring some essential equipment; that said, however, there's no way I could have left my uniform behind when going to seclude myself in the mountains.

When you bathe in a waterfall, you wear your uniform.

I took off my jersey, which was so wet it was like I'd already gone swimming in it, and changed into my uniform. The Ouga Falls that awaited me beyond the mist was practically an unexplored area, so there was no need to worry about people looking.

This is quite the lavish view to have all to myself.

My bag was waterproof, so its contents were safe—remembering that the uniform was about to get soaked as well, I tied my black belt.

I retied my hair, and then did stretches.

A little while ago, I was ready to jump in the stream without caring whether I had a heart attack, but you've got to warm up properly before bathing in a waterfall.

First, in order to scope out the plunge pool,(1) I tested the water from a little ways off—it was colder than I'd expected.

Is this really above freezing temperature?

Well, I guess if it was below freezing it would be frozen. And this is liquid.

I had to go against the flow, but it wasn't very deep; I walked slowly through the

water, being careful about slimy moss and stuff. It was actually easier to keep my footing than before.

Although it seemed unlikely I'd die by drowning or from a heart attack, it was so cold that I thought I might freeze to death.

Is it this cold already just from being near the summit of the mountain?

Um… Tsukihi-chan told me, as I recall… Every hundred meters you ascend, the air temperature drops by about 0.6 degrees… I wonder if water works the same way.

I reconsidered whether I should have done this tomorrow morning, or rather midday tomorrow, but I wouldn't get another chance like this, and besides, the weather tomorrow might not be so nice—I'd experienced the extreme fickleness of mountain weather firsthand.

Trying my best to keep the soles of my feet close to the riverbed, I splashed toward the plunge pool. I'd daydreamed about there being a cave behind the waterfall with treasure hidden inside, but as I drew near, I didn't see any sign of a gimmick like that.

Behind the waterfall was nothing but rock.

I suppose Master isn't the type of person who'd enjoy a contrivance like a secret scroll being hidden behind the waterfall—she's a straightforward martial artist.

I'll bathe gracefully in this waterfall, as her straightforward disciple.

But when I'd drawn several meters closer, misgivings began to well up… Like, "Huh? Am I really going to do this?"

It's fine for water to well up, but not misgivings.

Now that I think about it, it was quite rude to call this a disappointment compared to Niagara Falls—viewing it from up close, its intensity was nothing to sneeze at. Being drenched in this falling water would no doubt hurt the same as being whacked.

It would feel like a water jet cutter—no, like a water hammer.(2) Isn't that enough to smash my exhausted body into little pieces?

Yeah, in my current condition—

No. That's wrong. That's wrong, Karen Araragi.

I had muscle pain throughout my body, the skin was peeling off my feet, my knees were wobbling, my arms were throbbing and spasming, and I'd nearly used up all my stamina. No matter how many wild plants I stuffed down I was still hungry, I was certainly malnourished, and even though I didn't have altitude sickness, it would be hard to argue I was capable of thinking straight—in other words.

"…In other words, I'm in my best condition."

To hell with it!

Without making sure of the depth, I stepped into the plunge pool, and the endlessly falling water came rushing down on my head like a ton of bricks.

No raging torrent can put out my fire!

017

“Welcome back, Shinobu. Thanks for seeing Karen-chan there and back safely. Here are the doughnuts I promised.”

“Munch munch much.”

“Hmph. Karen-chan can be a real handful. She can’t do anything without my help.”

“That’s not true.”

“Huh?”

“I said, ‘That’s not true.’ I mean, I was the one lurking in your sister’s shadow and helping her out, but that’s not what I’m getting at—had I not been there, perhaps that giantess would have had a smoother time walking the mountain paths.”

“Huh? Huh?! What are you talking about, Shinobu?”

“Unlike yourself, o master of mine, your sister is an ordinary human, and I was following her from within her shadow; the strain must have been enormous. 'Tis not so different from carrying barbells.”

“Th-then, you were dragging her down? Not just following her?”

“Strictly speaking, 'twas ye who dragged her down.”

“Why didn’t you say something! My little sister was nearly killed, wasn’t she!?”

“I did tell ye. Just now. After I received the doughnuts. This is what happens when ye defer payment. Reflect on that.”

“You’re kidding… But you did save her when things got truly dangerous, after all. You and your legion of blond cousins… Oh, she said you really helped her out when you

encouraged her in the mist, when she couldn't see anything. She told me it was like a thorn that had always been stuck in her heart had come out—well, maybe it was a needle, not a thorn."

"Hm? What do ye mean? I don't know what you're talking about."

"What?"

"The last time I assisted that girl was when I found wild plants for her to eat—I didn't help her escape from the mist."

"S-she had to escape from the mist…?"

"That's not what ye ought to be hung up on."

"S-so who was it that encouraged her?"

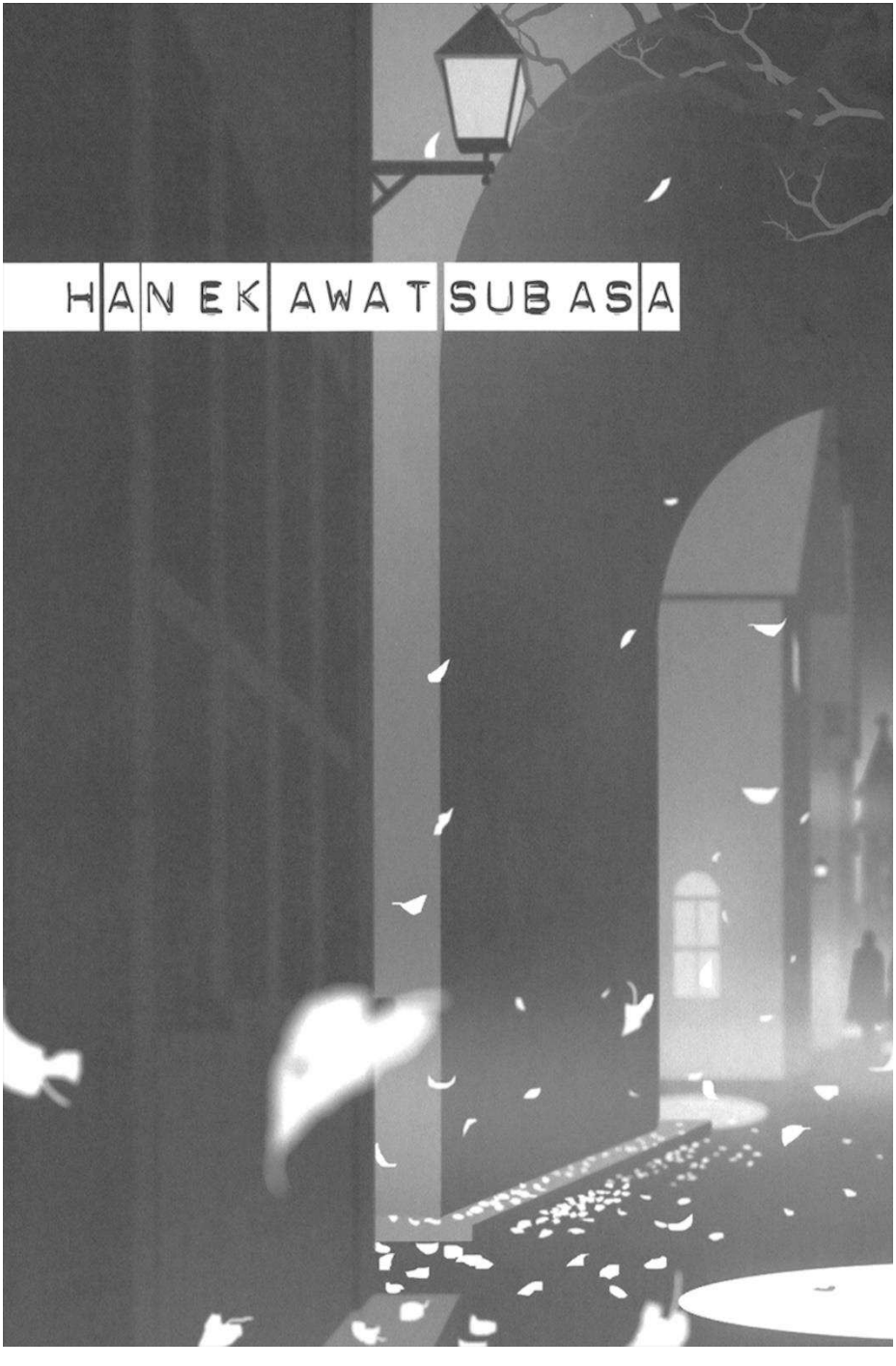
"Well, then. I said so, did I not? You're never truly by yourself. Especially when you're alone."

"……"

"Perhaps, had she turned around in the mist, she may have seen herself behind her—meeting a demon, meeting oneself; hence the name Ouga Falls.(1) Well, the self can take many forms."

"Like how there are various versions of you too?"

"Like how there are various versions of ye too. Well, ultimately, meeting yourself is merely the beginning. You've got to live with all the various versions of yourself forever—ka ka!"


HAN EK AWAT SUB ASA

Tsubasa Sleeping 001

Following the general theme of Wazamonogatari, this next arc once again features vampires. it's the story of Hanekawa's run-in with Dramaturgie and some vampires in Germany, with sardonic commentary from Meme throughout.

At the time, I had to do everything I possibly could in order to save Araragi-kun; however, the true difficulty did not lie in racing around the world on a lengthy manhunt.

Well, of course, pinpointing that man's location certainly wasn't easy to do, but thinking of how it was for Araragi-kun's sake, I never lost heart—though if I might confess something, it wasn't purely for Araragi-kun's sake, but likely also due to feelings of rivalry toward my junior Ougi Oshino. But, anyway.

Anyway, I made it.

I arrived.

I went to great pains, but I located Oshino-san—the supernatural technocrat, oddity phenomena specialist Meme Oshino-san.

Carelessly of me, I ended up feeling like I'd accomplished my goal, but the real problem came afterward.

The crucial moment came after I arrived.

Why? Because my journey didn't end with finding Oshino-san—my main goal, my main objective was to bring him back to Japan. Or

more specifically, to have him save Araragi-kun.

But, needless to say.

"I can't save him. People only save themselves in their own way, Miss Class Rep—"

Which is, of course, Oshino-san's consistent and invariable principle, and it was his consistent and invariable response to me when I called upon him.

He was resolute.

Stuck to it.

"Ha ha. You're certainly trying to save Araragi-kun in your own way, Miss Class Rep, but I'm not obligated to go along with it. I'm grateful for you telling me what my beloved Araragi-kun has gotten himself into, but if you want Araragi-kun to be rescued, then it ought to be Araragi-kun who saves himself."

"Saves himself… But—"

I was flustered by this unexpected development.

But, thinking it over, he kept to that policy even during spring vacation and Golden Week—it's not that he lacks emotion, but that he never acts on it.

He's not so much cold as he is severe.

More toward himself than to others.

I suppose he considers being moved to action by emotion to be a serious risk, as a specialist

—in that regard (whether or not he'd admit it himself; well, actually, I don't think he would admit it), he's similar to Kaiki-san.

Though, I hear from rumors that Kagenui-san is the exact opposite—so I guess it isn't an instruction from their boss Gaen-san.

If this is how it's going to be, I might have had better chances had I gone to Kagenui-san instead—my shoulders sagged.

No, it's my fault.

Overwhelmingly my fault.

I was shamelessly laboring under the assumption that if I told Oshino-san about Araragi-kun's dangerous situation—how he'd fully teamed up with Ougi Oshino, joining hands in mutual understanding—then he'd act immediately.

I'd deceived myself.

I hadn't just gone around the world; my itinerary covered nearly everywhere in it. So, after finally locating Oshino-san, I'd carelessly assumed there was no way my effort wouldn't pay off

—that my repeated hardships and exertions would mean nothing to him.

"Only Araragi-kun can save himself—and I'm doubtful as to whether Araragi-kun wants to be saved in the first place. It seems like what he desires now is really self-punishment."

"…Self-punishment?"

"I'm not saying it's self-destruction, though. Well, I suppose it's like him. Might say that's who Araragi-kun is—'I thought as much', you know? At any rate, I don't think that saving him can be for his sake. However—"

Miss Class Rep.

"Your repeated hardships and exertions weren't meaningless," Oshino-san continued.

"Speaking specifically about the content of my work as specialist, my job is to collect tales of oddities. It's possible you didn't know

this, but that's why I wander from place to place. You could say I travel in order to hear people's stories—so, would you mind telling me your story, Miss Class Rep? Just what kind of journey did you take to find me?"

"……"

"You were the star of that nightmare of a Golden Week, so I'm sure it was no ordinary trip. Just getting here is an accomplishment, but you must have had some strange experiences you can't fully explain along the way. Stories like that could be material for my job—for the subject

of my collection. I'm hard to please, but it might serve as motivation for me to save Araragi-kun."

…So, I told him.

In order to save Araragi-kun—in order to bring Oshino-san back.

What kind of journey I'd taken.

What lands I'd tread, what seas I'd crossed.

It was a journey to search for Oshino-san, a journey to search for myself, and perhaps, a journey to forget about Araragi-kun.

002

On one occasion, I got imprisoned in an old German castle.

(Imprisoned in an old German castle? Hey now, Miss Class Rep, what are you talking about all of a sudden?)

(Please be quiet and listen. If you don't understand that much, my story can't go any further.) After the affair with Oikura-san, I flew overseas for the first time—it happened right after that.

Come to think of it, that was the same time that Sengoku-chan was becoming ensnared by the snake, so my decision to leave Japan might have been a bit hasty.

I don't think it was an overreaction, though.

But Ougi-chan was aiming for a chance when I wasn't there to start her secret maneuvering, I have no doubt about that—though it may be more accurate to call it 'running rampant' than

'secret maneuvering'.

(Oh? You're being very harsh on this Ougi-chan, Miss Class Rep. I don't know what may have happened, but it's unusual for you to speak that badly of someone.) (Lots of things happened.)

(Hmph. Might it have something to do with how your hair's changed to that mix of black and white, like a white tiger?)

(I will talk about that later—I'm telling a completely different story right now.) But even if I'd remained in Japan, I don't think I could have protected Araragi-kun.

I didn't think the situation could be resolved without overturning Ougi-chan's existence—or perhaps, non-existence—at the root. For that purpose, I was certain that the only thing I could do was to find the missing Oshino-san.

Certain… no, actually, I wasn't certain.

At the time, I was full of anxiety about my actions—and no matter what I did, I had no one to rely on. The old me would have ended up pushing that anxiety onto my other self, but I can't do that anymore.

I don't have to do that anymore.

My other self.

My animal self, maybe.

Despite that, it was my desire to repay Araragi-kun that made up my mind to act.

He says he owes me, but to me, I'm the one who owes him—so in order to repay him, I had to bring Oshino-san back to Japan at any cost.

(At any cost, huh. Well, if your story is adequate as compensation for my work, then of course I'll go back.)

(I understand. In that case, please don't interrupt.)

(Ooh, scary—don't get so mad, Miss Class Rep. You seem lively; did something good happen?)

The reason I'd visited Germany in the first place was some information I'd acquired—a tip-off that a so-called specialist had gone from Japan to Germany on business.

There was no reason to assume it was about Oshino-san, and the source of the tip-off was a bit suspicious in the first place; however, as I had no other reliable leads, I

had no choice but to confirm whether or not it was right.

(Ha ha. So, it turned out to be wrong—I've never been to Germany. I mean, I haven't been to most countries.)

(Yes, I am aware—do you know how many places I've visited on a fool's errand trying to find you?)

(Don't be sad. That wild goose chase of yours wasn't entirely meaningless—well, if it can be useful for my job, that is.)

(I'm continuing.)

I was imprisoned in the dungeon of an old castle.

The floor, the walls, and the ceiling were all made of stone.

The bonds placed on me were made of iron, and even when I tried shaking them, they didn't yield an inch. The lock installed on the door was a primitive bolt, and it certainly did not seem like a mechanism that would open with a password.

No matter how I racked my brain, I could think of no way to break out of this cell with my own power—I was perfectly confined.

"……"

Well, there was an even more pressing issue than the prison's sturdiness—in the thirteen square meter dungeon, there were neither bathrooms nor toilet facilities.

Of course, it's not like I'd think to demand such hospitalities and amenities in a chamber meant for imprisonment—but that's not all; there was no opening in the iron bars for food to be passed through.

Naturally, there was no bed. Or futon.

Essentially, there were absolutely no "facilities for humans to live" in that cell—what did that mean?

I didn't want to think about it, but there was no need to.

It meant that they didn't intend to keep confining me here for very long.

(They? Who're they?)

("High-Waist" and "Low-Rise"—those two will appear later. But, before that.) I said "me", but.

I wasn't the only one in the cell.

"Girl. If you're thinking about a way to break out, you ought to give up now. It's useless."

While I was checking all the cell's nooks and crannies, he called out to me, seemingly unable to put up with his silence.

"We were finished from the moment we were captured—all that's left is for those two to do what they want with us."

"How gallant."

That was my reply.

Actually, leaning against the cell wall, sitting on one knee, he gave off a certain feeling of nobility—compared to that, I must look like I've completely lost it, driven to a frenzy at getting locked up in a small room.

But nevertheless, I had absolutely no intention to sit quietly and await my impending death like him.

I couldn't do that.

I still had goals I hadn't accomplished, and—while I don't know about the me from before—I was in no mood to meekly follow his advice.

“As I recall, when you fought with Araragi-kun, you gallantly gave up just like this—

Dramaturgie-san.” I couldn’t help but be sarcastic.

“……”

“That’s right.”

Yet without so much as a grin, he—the vampire extermination specialist Dramaturgie-san—

simply nodded.

003

(Dramaturgie? Well, goodness me. That's a name I haven't heard a while—wasn't he one of the three specialists who drove Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade onto the verge of death?)

(Quite right, Oshino-san. He was one of the people you negotiated with on Araragi-kun's behalf during spring break.)

(Hmph. I see. In that case, wouldn't it be natural for you to feel a visceral repulsion toward him, Miss Class Rep? He was one of the people who went after Araragi-kun, after all—although, since he and I are in the same business, I know he just thought of it as work.) (Yes, that is correct. I understand it would be unreasonable to want to blame him. I do understand that.)

(Ha ha. Seems you've become considerably more human, Miss Class Rep—I think you're better off this way. So, the specialist who'd gone from Japan to Germany was Dramaturgie, then?)

(Indeed.)

It appeared there was a fatal error in the information I'd gathered—after going every which way around the local area, at the destination I'd pinpointed was a foreigner so tall it was as if his height reached the sky.

In reality, he was over two meters tall, a strong-muscled, giant of a man—and I remembered him.

Spring break.

I witnessed his battle with Araragi-kun on the Naoetsu High School campus—come to

think of it, that the first time I'd seen Araragi-kun relishing in combat as a "vampire", wasn't it?

That was the first time I'd gotten involved with a so-called oddity phenomenon.

That was the beginning.

So I remembered it quite clearly.

I remembered how, at the time, Dramaturgie-san ruthlessly wielded dual flamberges in his attempt to "exterminate" Araragi-kun—I remembered that vampire extermination specialist and Araragi-kun trying to kill each other.

(Well, Araragi-kun had been turned into a vampire because Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade sucked his blood, but strictly speaking, Dramaturgie wasn't trying to kill him—

under the rules I'd negotiated, killing Araragi-kun would be foul play.) (Ah, yes. But I did not know that at the time.)

(Ha ha. As in, you don't know everything?)

(Indeed… I only know what I know. And speaking of not knowing; naturally, Dramaturgie-san did not know me. Unlike with the other two, I never directly interacted with him.) For that reason, Dramaturgie-san looked at me rather suspiciously when my misunderstanding led me to him. However, it wasn't simply a look one would give to an unknown child who had come to visit.

He was working.

(Working… if it's Dramaturgie's work, then it must be—)

(Yes, indeed. Vampire extermination. It was for that purpose he had gone to

Germany, and was now in the middle of an infiltration investigation.)

It appeared I'd been careless, and ended up misunderstanding the situation—I could accept that, but if it had to be the case, I'd rather the information have been totally bogus.

To think I would reach Dramaturgie-san while searching for Oshino-san—I was searching for a specialist to save Araragi-kun, but I ended up finding a specialist to exterminate him.

Could it be any more mismatched?

Well, according to Izuko Gaen-san and Episode-kun, Araragi-kun and the former Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, a.k.a. Shinobu-chan, were currently recognized as harmless, so I shouldn't have been afraid of another fight…

(I don't know about that. If Araragi-kun's situation is as desperate as you say, Miss Class Rep, then we don't know how much longer he'll keep that recognition as harmless.) (If that's what you think, please come back to Japan with me. Can't I tell you the story after we return? We'll get sleepy if we keep talking all night.)

(Well, now. We can think of it as the opposite of a bedtime story. For now, let's continue. You said it was a misunderstanding, but anyway, you found Dramaturgie. How did that lead to you getting imprisoned in an old castle?)

(Ah, as for that…)

"Japanese… hm. Actually, I remember the design of those clothes. Could you be an

acquaintance of Heart-Under-Blade's servant, girl?"

That's a professional for you.

Dramaturgie-san glared at me for a little while, and made that determination.

(Wait a second, Miss Class Rep. Is it possible you went all the way to Germany in your Naoetsu High School uniform?)

(…? Yes? I'm wearing my uniform right now, under this coat… Is there something wrong with that?)

(I mean… I don't really think Dramaturgie's perceptiveness was because he's a pro; well, that's alright. Let's move on. He asked whether or not you were Araragi-kun's acquaintance, so how did you respond, Miss Class Rep?)

Obviously, I said I was his friend.

Because I am his friend.

"I see."

Dramaturgie-san quickly nodded.

His demeanor was too brusque for me to read much emotion from his behavior—I really wanted to find out what he thought about Araragi-kun and failing to exterminate the "vampire"

Koyomi Araragi, but I was unable to do so.

I was lost.

I could only hope he didn't resent Araragi-kun—but this situation would be delicate at even the best of times, so I didn't want to pry any further.

(Well, Dramaturgie is a specialist who devotes himself to his work—ostensibly, at least, the fact he failed to hunt down Araragi-kun and Shinobu-chan… Heart-Under-Blade didn't weigh on him anymore, did it?)

(Yes… It seemed he views even his mistakes objectively while he's working.)
(Right, right. Compared to the other two, who were mobilized by self-interest and a mission, Dramaturgie was much easier to negotiate with.)

Indeed.

So, I ought to have meekly retreated as soon as I realized I had the wrong person—if I had, surely I wouldn't have been imprisoned in an old castle dungeon afterward.

But I made a mistake that would have been unimaginable before—I ended up thinking that I shouldn't let my time, effort, and travel expenses until now go to waste.

I couldn't cut my losses.

I thought it would be a waste if I wasn't able to gain anything from meeting Dramaturgie-san—I ended up thinking there was definitely something I'd be able to gain. Even if he wasn't Oshino-san, he was also a specialist.

Well, of course, whether I was resentful of Araragi-kun or not, I'm not so thoughtless as to try to find a way of protecting Araragi-kun from Ougi-chan from a vampire extermination specialist like Dramaturgie-san.

If it were me from before, I might have been able to do it; but at the time, I lacked the strength of mind to candidly beg for help from Dramaturgie-san, who, even if it was for a job, had tried to exterminate Araragi-kun.

Although, I could say that I'd finally achieved that lacking—but anyway, what I tried to get out of Dramaturgie-san were clues to search for Oshino-san.

While he wasn't in the group supervised by Izuko Gaen-san, from what I'd heard from Araragi-kun, Dramaturgie-san was certainly a member of some kind of organization; if so, he must belong to some kind of specialist network.

A specialist network must have an information network.

Since he'd interacted with Oshino-san in spring break, I thought there was a chance he'd be aware of Oshino-san's movements.

I was trying to make the best of the situation by acquiring new clues, so my line of thinking was very opportunistic.

(I don't think that's true. You weren't opportunistic, just surpassingly logical. Actually, weren't you able to find me because you acquired clues from Dramaturgie?)
(Well, yes, if you just look at the end result, but I took a considerably roundabout way to get here—I feel like I've been dragged around and around by oddity-related information. I was careless. Though, again, that's a different story—)

In the end, it did seem Dramaturgie-san knew about Oshino-san—well, technically, it wasn't Dramaturgie-san who knew, but rather, if he asked the organization he was affiliated with.

"They must have at least some information," was his brief answer.

I suppose it's not a very large industry.

"I can tell you, but…" Dramaturgie-san began.

It wasn't because of his kindheartedness toward a traveler from a foreign country that he was speaking with me, but rather the

indifference of someone who wanted to quickly get rid of a nuisance bothering him while he was working.

As I had lost my lead, if he could give me my next lead, any reason was fine, whatever it might be…

"Unfortunately, I'm in the middle of an infiltration investigation. I can't contact my organization."

That's how it was.

"If you intend to wait until I've finished my assignment, you can wait somewhere by eating sausage and beer… Oh, can you not drink beer at your age?"

I couldn't drink beer, and I couldn't wait.

I didn't have the time.

This is a race against time.

As long as he was working together with Ougi Oshino, I had no idea what kind of horrible things might be happening to Araragi-kun back in Japan while we were doing that.

(What actually was happening to Araragi-kun?)

(He was being killed by Sengoku-chan. Over and over. Over and over and over and over.) (Ha hah. Certainly no time to take it slow, was it.)

Despite that, I asked.

"How long does it seem your assignment will take?"

"It shouldn't take too long. Five years at most, in all likelihood it'll be settled within three years."

You think I could wait that long?

My youth will have ended.

If Araragi-kun were in my place, he'd have quipped something like that and turned it into an amusing conversation, but in reality, this was a serious discussion—from my perspective as a high school student, it would require an unbelievable amount of patience, but if you thought about it as "work," then three years and five years certainly weren't very long spans of time.

Even when they'd tried to exterminate Shinobu-chan's previous existence as Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, the vampire hunters must have waited for the most suitable date.

…For Araragi-kun to have ruined all that in just two weeks' time, he's far and away less of an ordinary person than I'd thought.

(By the way, Miss Class Rep. What language were you and Dramaturgie speaking in this conversation?)

(It seemed he understood Japanese, but his policy was to speak the language of the land he works in… So I was speaking broken German.)

(Even if it's broken, just being able to speak it is amazing—I'm taken aback. So, what happened after that? You say you couldn't wait until Dramaturgie's job was over, but surely you couldn't force him to do anything, right?)

(Yes. Of course, I couldn't get in the way of his work—so I intended to do the opposite.)
(The opposite?)

(Right—not getting in the way, but helping.)

Although, I didn't know whether or not that was the correct thing to do.

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"'High-Waist' and 'Low-Rise'," Dramaturgie-san began matter-of-factly, after I sat down at the table. "The two vampires currently disturbing this area. Neither is the other's minion; it's an unusual case of vampire twins."

"Vampire twins… that's unusual?"

After all, vampires themselves are unusual, so it's hard to tell.

Dramaturgie-san curtly ignored my question. Although he had accepted my request to cooperate, it appeared he had no intentions of becoming friendly with me.

(Vampire twins are unusual.)

(Ah, as I'd thought.)

(It's what we call a rare species. I believe the vampire he pursued during spring break, Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, was also a rare species—as a specialist, Dramaturgie often seems to get commissioned to exterminate these kinds of mutants.) (Mutants…?)

(Though, you could also say he gets saddled with bothersome jobs. He's an honest man with a good work ethic, so he attracts that kind of twisted work—just like how you attract guys like Araragi-kun, Miss Class Rep.)

(Please don't say it like that… I was the one attracted to him, after all.) (Now, even if you had some knowledge about vampires, you were still fundamentally a layman; for a man with such high professionalism like Dramaturgie to readily accept your request

to cooperate, that's quite an unexpected development.)

(Well, it certainly wasn't 'readily'… I had reservations of my own, and it appears Dramaturgie-san did as well.)

(Reservations? Hm? How intriguing… Do continue.)

Dramaturgie-san ignored my question, and continued.

"I said they're disturbing this area, but it's not like the threat appeared suddenly. Rather, High-Waist and Low-Rise's vampiric activity has recently increased to levels that we vampire extermination specialists can no longer ignore."

"…In other words, their designation as harmless was revoked?"

"In the twins' case, that designation wasn't made in the first place. The measure currently taken with Heart-Under-Blade and Heart-Under-Blade's minion is really just an exception."

I still couldn't read any emotion from Dramaturgie-san's austere facial expression, but it seemed like he was a little bitter about that incident—that showed through unintentionally, even if he didn't feel any resentment.

(Ah, that's right. That designation as harmless was something I'd asked Gaen-san for at the time, and received with some difficulty—and there certainly are people who'd trivialize and ignore it regardless.)

(?)

(Oh, just business talk, pay it no mind.)

"If I must say, it was during their probation period—you may have

misunderstood, but it's not the philosophy of our organization to go exterminating every vampire we find. Episode and Guillotine-Cutter may have thought differently, but we at the very least do not wish to wipe out all vampires—we simply believe their numbers and disposition need to be regulated so they don't become a menace."

"……"

Somehow, it made me think of wild animal management or environmental protection—quite realist.

Well, not realist, but modern, perhaps.

In any case, it seemed the twin vampires High-Waist and Low-Rise had deviated from the norm.

"To say it in a way you Japanese would be familiar with, it's like when a carnivorous beast tastes human flesh for the first time—even though it may be under our protection, it must be dealt with."

"Yes, that is familiar."

It was difficult to simply agree for such a delicate issue, but that was an easy example to comprehend.

Even allowing for Dramaturgie-san's sour looks and his quarrel with Araragi-kun, he still gave off an impression of being hard to approach; however, now that I'd requested to collaborate with him, he may at least want to try to come to an understanding with me.

Setting aside whether that was a success or not.

(Now, now. To Dramaturgie, if he ends up getting too close to a collaborator, a situation might arise in which he wasn't able to cast them aside when the time came.) (Perhaps,

but please don't give me that "now, now". Surely he could contrive to cast me aside somehow.)

"What did the vampire twins do, specifically?"

It was a question to which I could only expect a repulsive answer, but I couldn't cooperate with him without asking.

As I already knew about Araragi-kun and his "partner" Shinobu-chan, I was no longer in a position to condone vampire extermination simply "because they're vampires."

It's not a question of good and evil or pros and cons.

(Shinobu-chan also believed that 'not all oddities ought to be eradicated', right?) (Mm, well, I suppose. Though, people like Kagenui-chan have a very different way of thinking.) (Is that so—oh, wait a moment. Oshino-san, you refer to Kagenui-san as 'Kagenui-chan'?) It was unclear how much concern Dramaturgie-san had for my position, but I suppose he couldn't expect much of a partnership with me if he didn't properly tell me about the situation

—so, he gave me a brief explanation of High-Waist and Low-Rise's misdeeds, which had recently come to light.

(Expect a partnership? I wouldn't think Dramaturgie would do something like that with a strange girl who suddenly appeared in front of him… But from his point of view, wasn't he just utilizing something useful, even if it was a girl he'd never met?) (That is right, of course. But even in utilizing a girl

he'd never met, it was necessary to disclose this information—please pay attention.)

(Yes, yes.)

Upon hearing it, it seemed like some kind of urban legend—although you could say that's only natural given how it involves vampires.

Travelers were disappearing one after another, they say.

There'd been a statistically significant increase in incidents of young, teen travelers who'd come as tourists to Germany and gone missing.

There might have been even more victims if we include the people who hadn't been reported.

The people who'd gone missing were travelers, so in other words, they were all strangers to the area—although, by then it was already at the point where the local media were alarmed. If the statistics were released, it wasn't hard to imagine it becoming a big international uproar.

"The circumstances in which the travelers go missing have all been different, so at present the police don't seem to think it's all the same culprit… but since we haven't neglected our 24-hour monitoring of High-Waist and Low-Rise, the truth of the case is as plain as daylight to us."

Dramaturgie-san spoke solemnly.

"They've let go all self-control. It appears all of the travelers who've gone missing were carried off to their hideout, and we don't know where that is—unfortunately, I don't think there's much hope for their survival."

"……"

Indeed.

There's no way vampires would kidnap humans with no goal in mind—and it wouldn't be abduction for the purpose of demanding ransom money either.

That's not how vampires see humans. How do they see us? Well, that would most likely simply be the result of that formidable food chain.

In other words—food.

Something to eat.

Vampires drink humans' blood and eat their flesh.

Sucking on the bones—licking the brains.

(Hah hah—you seem disgusted, Miss Class Rep.)

(Well, hm… It's not something I can easily accept, so I suppose I am.) (But you understand, don't you? For vampires, it's a way of supplying nourishment, and a reproductive activity. They can't live if they don't do it, nor can they survive as a species. That's basic knowledge, though, I suppose.)

(Quite. Certainly, it's not so different from a human getting lost in the mountains and a bear seeing them as food—it's just…)

(It's just?)

(Actually, I'll talk about that afterward.)

(Will you now. That's suggestive. But, well, this is much easier to listen to than Araragi-kun's stories. At least, as far as your lack of digression and getting absorbed in idle chatter goes.) (I'm sure Araragi-kun wouldn't get absorbed in idle chatter with Dramaturgie-san either… not that I'd know, of course.)

(Well then, please continue.)

“They’ve gone completely outside the bounds of moderation as vampires—they may need to eat in order to live, but no matter how you look at it, this is overeating.”

Dramaturgie-san spoke matter-of-factly.

I couldn’t tell whether he was stifling his emotions, or whether he didn’t feel anything with regard to this “eating problem” in the first place.

“As their targets for the time being are limited to travelers, there are signs they’re trying to avoid detection for their crimes… but, of course, their attempt at a cover-up has long since failed. Might as well have not even tried. You could say it’s for the twins’ own sake that they’re dealt with before they commit even more crimes.”

“For the twins’ own sake?”

Even if it’s his work and he wants to avoid moral uncertainty, isn’t that a bit hypocritical? That was my reflexive feeling, and it may have shown on my face.

Dramaturgie-san continued.

“At the very least, I’m not dealing with the twins for humans’ sake.”

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(An eating problem, huh. Speaking of which, I've had lots of opportunities to eat fish lately.) (In a place like this, of course you would.)

(Home is where you make it, no matter where that might be. I may be more suited for this than living in a home, actually. But you know, whenever I eat a fish, I look into its eyes and think,

"This expression is most definitely that of a corpse.")

(Please don't observe the facial expressions of fish so carefully… Well, they do say people

"have the eyes of a dead fish," I suppose.)

(Humans survive by eating other living things; Mr. Fish might be what makes us feel that most directly, that's all I'm saying… This is idle chatter, isn't it. But I did understand what you meant.) (You did?)

(Indeed. I thought it was strange that as a pro and a specialist, Dramaturgie would accept a request to cooperate from a girl he'd just met, but there was another side to the story. He does some nasty stuff, doesn't he—although, you butted in having partly anticipated that kind of thing. You're really something, Miss Class Rep.)

(……)

Young travelers getting kidnapped.

Going missing—not coming home.

Street gossip. Secondhand stories. Urban legends.

The culprit being a vampire might be a bit too clean of an ending for a ghost story, but nevertheless, I was the ideal person for the situation.

After all, I'm young, and a traveler.

As if made to order, I was perfectly suited to be a decoy.

"Less like a decoy and more like bait, quite literally. To entice the vampire twins," Dramaturgie-san said severely. "You'll get kidnapped by High-Waist and Low-Rise, and I'll follow behind to locate their hideout. We're not a law enforcement agency, so we don't really need much evidence, but at present our suspicions are nothing more than conjecture. It's not impossible that the twins are innocent—"

So that's why we need to catch them in the act—or why we need to locate their hideout and find the travelers who'd been kidnapped.

"We won't find the travelers. If the vampires' appetites have gone wild, then there won't be a single bone or patch of skin left from those humans."

"……"

"They won't leave a single hair or a single nail. But if we locate the hideout, we should be able to find some kind of evidence—that's why I need you to get kidnapped."

No guarantee of my safety.

Might not be able to rescue me in time.

I might get eaten and die.

Do I still feel like cooperating?

It felt more like a notice to prevent him from getting sued afterward than a confirmation of my intent, but I answered his question immediately.

“Yes. I will cooperate. If it will let me learn Oshino-san’s whereabouts.”

“…Let me just say, all that’s within my power to promise is to inquire at my organization. I can’t promise anything more than that—I can’t promise anything. The organization doesn’t necessarily have the latest information on that Hawaiian shirt man, and even if they do, they won’t necessarily tell me. Of all the warriors affiliated with the organization, I’m just an underling—there’s a limit to the information I can access.”

“I don’t mind. Please, let’s get started.”

Thus I, who once received the designation “rations” from the king of oddities, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, despite time passing and the country changing, once again took on a mission to be food—however…

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In fact, I made quite a big gamble on the amount of information I could obtain from Dramaturgie-san about Oshino-san, and on how reliable that information was in the first place

—but now that I think about it, Dramaturgie-san may have made a similar gamble on me.

I might be a young traveler, but even though I was perfect to be used as bait—not false bait, actual bait—if there were any other options, I'm sure a professional specialist like him wouldn't want an amateur girl he'd just met participating in his work.

It wasn't a question of ethics or morals, but an excess of uncertain elements; unlikely as it might be, he couldn't even be assured I wasn't on the vampire twins', High-Waist and Low-Rise's side myself.

Whether or not I could be trusted, whether or not I could be relied upon.

It was more dubious than a ghost story.

But he must have accepted my request to collaborate and the transaction I proposed because he didn't see another way forward.

Using me to locate their hideout and settle the case before more damage is done—to borrow his words, "for the twins' sake"—may not have been the optimal plan, but it certainly wasn't a bad one; I had some oddity-related acumen, after all.

Ougi-chan might look at our intentions and appraise us both as fools, with that thin smile, that dark smile of hers—

(—looking back now, regrettably, we'd probably deserve it. Both me and Dramaturgie-san ended up imprisoned in that old castle.)

(Setting aside how that happened, weren't High-Waist and Low-Rise under constant surveillance? Yet you couldn't locate their hideout without using a decoy operation? Kinda idiotic, isn't it?)

(I also doubted that point a bit; but when I actually got kidnapped, I understood. It's because the hideout itself was an oddity of some kind. That is, the old castle that was High-Waist and Low-Rise's hideout… it was what they call a citadel, but in a town that didn't exist.) (A town that didn't exist… the scope of this story's gotten bigger. I see, I see. That's why they couldn't find the missing tourists no matter where they looked.) (And why they couldn't find the hideout. The style is different, but was it what you call a "barrier"?)

(If they controlled an entire citadel, then they must've been pretty important vampires. They're bound by silly names like 'High-Waist' and 'Low-Rise', but I certainly understand why dealing with them was delayed—it was really for the sake of conservation.) (Like how they wanted to conserve Shinobu-chan?)

(Hah hah. Shinobu-chan in her prime could've controlled an entire country, not just a city. So, the vampire twins' hideout would only materialize when they brought kidnapped humans inside? Understood. That'd stymie a specialist like Dramaturgie. Unless he used a decoy or bait, that is.)

(Would you use a different method, Oshino-san?)

(I'm fundamentally a negotiator, so my job would be to go between Dramaturgie and the vampire twins—my job would be to butt in. I'd be in the same position as you, Miss Class Rep.

Although, I'm not so heroic as to volunteer myself as a decoy.) (…I'm heroic?)

(Anyone can see that. But compared to spring break, you're still somewhat self-sacrificial, but not so single-mindedly devoted. You make a good impression. You just have an ulterior motive to obtain something you earnestly desire.)

Quite right.

Even if it were a big gamble, I'd embarked upon it precisely because I detected a chance of success—it certainly wasn't a barbarous act done in ignorance of cost-effectiveness.

Thinking of the dangerous situation Araragi-kun was currently in, what I was doing was completely within the bounds of safety.

(I don't think that's at all the case… But, we all place weight on things differently.) (Indeed. Dramaturgie-san as well, I'm sure.)

However, I can't report that Dramaturgie-san and I won that gamble—we both wound up in a dungeon, what more can I say.

Can't say anything but 'I told you so'.

This is why gambling destroys your life.

It might not have been wise to make poor calculations and act according to probability—I can't say entirely for certain, but if we were gambling, it may have been

easier to achieve victory with a desperate suicide attack like Araragi-kun might do.

Though, of course, this was a decoy operation planned strategically by Dramaturgie-san, who was not a professional gambler.

For the sake of his honor as a specialist, let me just say that it didn't go entirely wrong—until halfway, the plan was being carried out perfectly.

(Until halfway, huh. Wouldn't that mean, in other words, that it was half-baked?)
(That's harsh, Oshino-san…)

But there's an element of truth in that.

If the plan had failed completely, at least Dramaturgie-san and I wouldn't have been confined to a dungeon with no hope of escape—oddly enough, if it were the case that our strategy completely failed, we would likely have had an easier time reorganizing ourselves afterward.

It's like how they say a home partially destroyed by fire is nastier than one completely destroyed by fire—well, that theory does have a certain persuasiveness for someone whose house once burned down like me.

To explain from the beginning, the part of the plan in which I played a decoy went splendidly—

a happy result, to use an odd expression(1). As a young traveler and a Japanese tourist, I successfully got kidnapped.

As I was walking carelessly down a remote road in the pitch black night, I encountered them—

High-Waist and Low-Rise.

The two vampires.

I encountered the vampire twins.

(Hah hah. Araragi-kun would've said "walking carelessly and carefree," wouldn't he?)(2) (I was not walking carefree. I was quite nervous—skipping along would be out of the question. I was practically walking on tiptoe.)

And I surely am not Araragi-kun.

I didn't technically "encounter" them—I was caught in a pincer attack from the front and back.

I suddenly felt a presence behind me, and turning around, I found a golden-haired girl clothed in a dress so pitch black it dissolved into the night.

That golden hair immediately reminded me of Shinobu-chan, but I might not have needed to see her golden hair to tell she was an extraordinary presence.

The color of her eyes was red.

I suppose I could compare them to being bloodshot.

(Araragi-kun would've said "like Chiba prefecture," don't you think?)(3) (Even Araragi-kun wouldn't say that. Chiba doesn't have a "red" image, does it?) (But that's because he'd call it the Bousou Peninsula, right?)(4) (If you're going to keep making fun, I'll stop talking. This is a serious scene.) Returning to the story.

Reflexively, I took evasive action.

Gazed at by those red eyes and utterly quavering in fear at the faint smile on her face, I instinctively prepared to run away—I

nearly abandoned my role of getting kidnapped by the vampires.

I'm a complete amateur.

All I'd accumulated was information, and I wasn't suited for praxis at all—Ougi-chan would scoff at me.

I certainly won't say I got lucky, but as soon as I turned around instinctively to start running, my feet suddenly stopped.

It was a pincer attack.

In front of me, where a short while ago there had definitely been nobody there, a blonde, red-eyed non-existence had come into being—standing in my way.

Like a wall.

Blocking my way.

In counterpoint to the vampire in the pitch-black dress behind me, the vampire in front of me was wearing a pure white tuxedo.

With a smart bow tie.

Smiling thinly, gazing at me with eyes that really did look bloodshot.

A smile thin as a knife.

(I see. The twins were a man and a woman? All the more unusual.) (Well, thinking about it now, I honestly can't assert whether they were men or women… I'll call them "she" and "he" for convenience, but I couldn't really judge their sexes. They were both so very beautiful—as if they'd transcended sex itself.)

(Hmph. That's not all that unusual for oddities. All you need to do is observe their division of roles.)

(Division of roles?)

(Assigning themselves to be male or female… Even in a community of two, you can

see there's a certain social sense about it. Very interesting.)

(Social sense… Perhaps. If so, it's a completely different mode of being from Shinobu-chan.) They looked like teenage girls and boys not so different from me in age, but a vampire's appearance holds little meaning.

The important part is how they are on the inside.

The difficulty lies in how they are on the inside.

Even if they're not five hundred or six hundred years old like Shinobu-chan, I'm sure they've lived much longer than their looks would lead you to imagine.

Afterward, I truly realized that.

Following what Dramaturgie-san told me, the girl in the dissolving dress was High-Waist, and the boy in the bright white tuxedo was Low-Rise; but that distinction didn't seem to be very consequential.

They had successfully taken positions point-reflected from each other with me as the center—I could only see the two of them as forming a single body.

Surrounded by four red eyes.

Trapped by four red eyes.

Caught in the glare of twin vampires from the front and behind.

As if I was rooted to the spot, I couldn't move an inch—I couldn't even tremble in fear.

Although, I'm uncertain exactly how accurate it is to describe the twins as staring or glaring at me.

It seemed like their gaze was actually passing right through me, and they could only see each other.

Only Low-Rise for High-Waist.

Only High-Waist for Low-Rise.

I don't think they could see me—despite being in their line of sight, it felt like I was being completely ignored.

Well, you might say being ignored in that situation would be the best I could hope for, but of course, it didn't last—after that, I got carried off.

All according to plan.(5)

But that's as far as it went according to plan.

007

I couldn't know how they abducted me.

My role was to get kidnapped, and even if I had tried to resist, without a doubt I would have failed.

I mean, I would have succeeded.

Carried like a piece of luggage between the two of them, I was brought into the old castle in the center of the fortress city that shouldn't exist—then I was thrown into the dungeon.

I hadn't been treated violently, but there were no hints of anything that might be called courtesy

—and when they left me in the dungeon and withdrew, I felt relieved from the bottom of my heart.

It wasn't as though it was my first time confronting an oddity, or even confronting a vampire—

nor was it my first time getting forcibly abducted—but I hadn't gotten used to it.

My heart couldn't stop pounding.

(It's more dangerous when you get used to it, you know.)

(Even for a professional and a specialist such as yourself, Oshino-san?) (Mm. Or rather, I wouldn't want to get used to it. Whatever it might be, whatever kind of job, as soon as you think you've gotten used to it, that's the right time to retire—although, it doesn't seem like there's been any trouble in your story so far, Miss Class Rep…) (Yes, well. Forgive me for saying so, but I believe I

played the role of kidnapping bait quite masterfully.)

(Hah hah. Just like Princess Peach, aren't you.)

(Nowadays, Princess Peach isn't being constantly kidnapped, I don't think…) (So this means it was Dramaturgie who made a mistake, then? Surely he didn't fail to tail you after using you as bait, did he? Speaking of fishing, was it like a fish getting away with the lure?

If that's the case, it'd be an error most unbecoming of a professional.)

(That's not what happened… That's not where Dramaturgie-san made a mistake. He tailed me, painstakingly, as I was being kidnapped, and successfully infiltrated the imaginary citadel when it appeared.)

(He broke through the barrier, then? To be honest, I'd think that would amount to his job being over… But does this mean his intrusion was detected?)

(Er…)

Well, something like that, broadly speaking. In the original plan, Dramaturgie-san would have made a preemptive strike on the twins—but he ended up receiving a preemptive strike himself, a pincer attack, and got captured.

As I was calming myself down by saying, "After this I just wait to be rescued," when High-Waist and Low-Rise violently threw that giant specialist into the stone dungeon, I was dumbfounded.

Honestly, it was a case I hadn't even considered.

It made me realize how I'd unconsciously assumed professionals don't make mistakes—but believing that if I performed my role then everything would go well afterward was putting rather too much on Dramaturgie-san.

From the moment he was forced to do the job together with an amateur, the mission had already become considerably irregular.

It was no longer standard.

It had become a job where the manual didn't apply.

So you could say that I made him fail.

(Nah, it's completely wrong for you to burden yourself with that responsibility, Miss Class Rep.

As soon as he included an amateur in his plan, the responsibility was Dramaturgie's—although, I'm not one to talk. I've exposed you to danger as well.)

(If that's what you think, please repay that debt by not saying anything else and going to save Araragi-kun.)

(Well, we're even on that account.)

(I don't know how we got even…)

(I won't say anything else, and I'll listen to your story.) (You're really making fun of me, aren't you.)

(Leaving that aside, why did Dramaturgie fail in his duty? As far as I've heard, it doesn't seem like there was a big reason for a mistake… They had the numbers advantage as well as the location advantage, but the twins were vampires, and Dramaturgie is a vampire specialist. It's right up his field as a specialist; if he saw a chance of success, then it can't have been a gamble with long odds.

Must have been over 80% chance of success.) Of course.

For both me and Dramaturgie-san, the most difficult stage of the plan ought to have been over.

However, although I compared the present strategy of using me as a lure to fishing, it would be more accurate to describe it as hunting.

They're same in that they both take away the lives of other living things, but one difference between fishing and hunting is that in the case of hunting, there's a non-insignificant possibility that the hunter becomes the hunted—although naturally, a specialist like Dramaturgie-san, not being an amateur like me, ought to have considered it.

He ought to have calculated the risk of becoming the hunted.

There was no reason for him to have been careless.

This citadel was the twins' hideout and enemy territory, so he obviously would have imagined all the critical situations—yet even so, it's possible for situations to arise that are beyond expectations.

Moreover, it wasn't a critical situation.

It was a "better" situation than what we'd hypothesized.

"I was awaiting the moment to exterminate High-Waist and Low-Rise when I discovered surviving kidnapped travelers, whom I'd thought were certainly all slaughtered. While I was setting them free outside the barrier, I got stabbed in the back."

Exceedingly matter-of-factly, Dramaturgie-san analyzed the cause of his

own failure—well, he succeeded in rescuing the survivors, and set them free outside the barrier, so it might not be entirely correct to call it a failure.

Even if the plan had been ruined.

So Dramaturgie-san likely didn't have any regrets as a professional, much less feel ashamed for his actions—the survivors had all been very young children, not merely young travelers, so I have no intention of condemning his decision as an error.

I have no such intention, but that didn't help us out of the present situation—and that was the circumstance in which Dramaturgie-san and I got imprisoned in the dungeon of an old castle.

008

"Escape is impossible. Give up."

Dramaturgie-san said solemnly, as I inspected the inside of the cell—from his perspective, I must look exceptionally stubborn in the face of death.

"Those children will carry out my objective—when word reaches the organization, another warrior will be dispatched. High-Waist and Low-Rise's future extermination is all but decided—I completed the job, if in a different manner than expected. Nothing more is required."

"……"

This man gives up too easily.

Has he attained some kind of enlightenment?

And I'd have liked him to have given a bit of thought to how my goal hadn't been realized in the least—before entrusting the future to those children.

(Well, your worldviews are different, in his case. Might say his stance is long-term—and drastic.

He must have reckoned that successfully rescuing several victims, even if you end up being the single sacrifice, Miss Class Rep, would be a positive result overall.) (Because he's a pro?)

(Right—because he's a pro. You could say his gallant withdrawal from the battle with Araragi-kun was also the result of that kind of calculation.)

"…If we give up, we'll just get eaten, won't we?"

"Even if we don't give up, we'll get eaten. So giving up means fewer regrets in the end."

It might have been a warrior's advice, but it was quite hard to agree with.

"I didn't fulfill my promise to you, but I'm sure Heart-Under-Blade's minion will be able to get through whatever trouble he's in."

"……"

His professionalism was too lofty, and his force of will was too strong, so it appeared Dramaturgie-san had a tendency to get through everything by changing "the way you look at it."

There's virtue in that, but I can't accept it.

I took a deep breath.

"I will not give up," I said. "I can't afford to die in this fantasy land. Even if Araragi-kun just saves himself in his own way—I want to be involved."

"…You want honor? For being helpful to your friend."

He seemed flabbergasted at just how stubborn I was being in the face of death—right, well, it's not that I don't want that honor.

I really want that honor.

But not just that.

Thinking of how despondent Araragi-kun and Senjougahara-san would be if they heard that I died being eaten by vampires in a place like this, I can't abandon my life so easily.

I couldn't look my friends in the eye if I didn't struggle vainly here—that's all I wanted to avoid.

(Quite some willpower. If I were in that situation, I'd give up right away.)

(Don't speak without thinking, please—if you were here, Oshino-san, you'd be devising a way to negotiate with the vampire twins and survive, wouldn't you?) (Hah hah. If you know that, wouldn't that mean you tried the same thing? And the reason you say it didn't go well was that there was an even more unforeseen development afterward?) (……)

"Ah, that's right. If you're lucky, you might be able to become a minion of the twins'."

Dramaturgie san seemed to be trying to comfort me—but that seemed to me like the more unlucky possibility compared to the alternative.

"In my case, I have no such hope. No doubt I will be tortured for information on the organization—however, that won't be a problem. There is a suicide poison inserted into my back tooth for times like this."

"Dramaturgie-san… can't you think more wishfully?"

Unable to bear it any longer, I asked him.

It certainly wasn't something one ought to ask their elder, and a specialist at that, but after being showered in that room's melancholic mood, I couldn't think of anything better to say.

I have poor circulation in my brain even at the best of times.

(Hah hah. That's the first time I've heard the word "melancholic" used correctly. I'd thought it was only used like "I like melon and cauliflower.")(1)

(Well, that was what the mood really felt like.)

"Wishful thinking?"

Dramaturgie-san looked up, as if it was the first time he'd heard the term.

"Yes. Isn't that what we ought to reflect on this time? If we'd considered the possibility of survivors when we came up with our bait operation, you wouldn't have gotten stabbed in the back, would you?"

"……"

"If you only ever envision the worst case, then yes, you might be able to avoid the worst case, but you'll never reach the best case, right? If you want to seize a chance, you have to envision that chance beforehand."

People who can't see themselves as happy are unable to become happy—that's what this is, though I do really believe that.

"Predict a good development. Like that someone will come to save you—if you don't, when someone does come to save you, you won't be able to take their hand. Isn't that right?"

To be honest, these lines were less objections or declarations of belief, and more me having a bit of a fit of anger at Dramaturgie-san's excessive gloominess. But as for how he interpreted them—

"I see. If you say so, why don't I give you this too."

As if taking out a coin, he casually produced a briar thorn from his pocket.

009

"Get out." ".tuo teG"

Some time later, the twins appeared in the dungeon and took me away, leaving Dramaturgie-san inside—it was the first time I'd heard High-Waist and Low-Rise's voices.

Well, the two of them had exchanged words when they were kidnapping me, but they hadn't spoke to me—at the time I'd thought it was because people generally don't talk to their food, but I may have been mistaken.

Anyway, I was taken out of the dungeon.

As I'd surmised, the dungeon didn't appear to be designed for long-term stays—but since that seemed worse than the alternative, I certainly can't say I was happy to be right.

(Were you being taken out as a midnight snack, Miss Class Rep?) (It was already close to dawn at that point, though—but I wasn't breakfast, either.) (?)

To be honest.

Even if it was for Araragi-kun's sake, it would be a lie to say I had absolutely no qualms about helping Dramaturgie-san with his work.

Whether it's fishing or hunting.

I've already mentioned that I was opposed to exterminating vampires solely because they're vampires—and even though I'd been shown that the case against High-Waist and Low-Rise was just, the fact the vampire twins were attacking humans was still not enough for my doubts to completely disappear.

Carnivorous beasts who learn the taste of humans are put down.

They're culled.

I couldn't readily accept that idea; the worldview under which I'd eaten until now wasn't quite that strict, and I'd lived a life of only theory, so I'd considered the so-called food chain to simply be the providence of nature.

Humans consume other living things, so if a human gets eaten by another living thing, it just can't be helped—that was how I justified it.

I already receive harsh criticism from Senjougahara-san regarding my diet.

So I didn't think of the twins as sinful just for that—even abducting travelers, which humans would view as an unforgivable wrong, couldn't be called unforgivable if you thought about it from a vampire's perspective.

I couldn't decide whether or not it was alright to sacrifice the vampire twins for the sake of saving Araragi-kun.

I had doubts.

(Whether you cooperated or not, though, Miss Class Rep, the twin's fate was decided at the moment they were designated as harmful; there's no need for you to think too hard about it.) (Yes, that is true, of course. You're right. It was like I was pretending to be conflicted—I would always prioritize Araragi-kun, no matter what.)

(But you must have had your reasons for participating in the bait operation.) (I didn't have reasons; my reason was a person—however.)

My indecision was pointless.

If they need to eat in order to supply nourishment to live, then they're just like us, and I may have had no choice but to accept being eaten—if I had accepted it as simply the providence of nature, then I might have given up.

In any case, there were times I'd even thought that I'd be fine with getting eaten by Araragi-kun

—I might even have been alright with my life ending getting eaten by these vampire twins.

If the twins had kidnapped humans in order to eat, that is.

(…It wasn't in order to eat?)

(Indeed. It was… in order to play.)

(To play?)

(To play.)

I wasn't brought to the dining room as a meal—I was surprised to find myself in a wide game room, tied down, facing upward, on top of a billiards table.

The two of them stood on both sides of the billiards table, with me as the center point. If I had been tied down on top of a dining table, I wouldn't have to imagine what would happen next; however, on a billiards table, I had no clue.

Well, there were no holes for the balls to fall into, so it wasn't actually a billiards table… but the vampire twins kindly explained to me what was about to begin.

Just how they intended to play with me, all tied up—

(You know the game Topple the Pole? It appeared they intended to use me to do that.)

(Topple the Pole? Like from field day?)

(Not that; what you play on the beach or in a sandbox. It's the game where you make a mound out of sand, and stick a pole in the middle… You take turns removing the sand, and if you make the pole fall down then you lose.)

(Oh, I know that one. Seems Araragi-kun often did it alone.) (I don't think he often did it alone…)

(Since toppling the pole means you lose, I feel like it should be called Don't Topple the Pole instead… So, how exactly did they do it on top of a billiards table, then? You say they intended to "use" you…)

(That's right…)

The rules of this game were about the same as the original's.

It's simple, if you think of me as the mound of sand and my life as the pole.

They tear off pieces of my body from either side, and whoever's turn I die on would lose.

The twins explained it to me.

They gave me a polite explanation in both German and English—as if making me understand that I was the mound of sand was essential to playing the game.

I wasn't a meal.

I was a game.

It was an act of toying with another creature's life.

If they had kidnapped people to play with them like this—then it was certainly not something I could accept.

The unexpected survivors among the kidnapped travelers presented an

irregularity that tripped up Dramaturgie-san, but I now understood the reason—essentially, the reason only young children were alive was that their bodies were too small; they didn't have enough flesh on them, so they died too easily.

They were unfit to be proper playthings.

So they happened to survive—just for that.

On the other hand, the reason so many teenage travelers had been targeted was that their vitality was strong—they would last a while, so they could be played with longer.

Just for that.

That's the only reason I was kidnapped.

"……"

I felt a fierce fury.

It was a raging storm of emotions, utterly beyond the threshold of what I could have felt before.

To think I'd been forcing something like this onto her…

I felt nothing but remorse for that—but that remorse is something I'll carry with me from now on.

I'll hold it tight.

It seemed High-Waist had opted to go first, so before Low-Rise, she moved to tear off a piece of my body.

She casually grabbed my left breast.

Stop it. Let go.

The only one who can touch me there—is Araragi-kun.

I bit down on my back tooth.

010

"This briar thorn is nothing but a suicide poison for me, but for you it may be different. If you will not give up even at the point of being eaten—if you cannot dispense with that wishful thinking, then you might as well insert this into your back teeth like me."

"…What happens if I bite down on it?"

"Well, I don't know. I don't know what will happen, but something will happen—that's the type of thing this is. I intend to use it when I am prepared for death; you can use it when you want to live."

That was our conversation.

Honestly, I didn't think I was going to use it… but seeing as I had inserted the thorn into my back teeth as he'd instructed, I may have envisioned a future in which I would.

It almost seemed symbolic of the local color of Germany—as you know, Germany is the setting of Sleeping Beauty.

The princess who slept for hundreds of years in an old castle.

I have no intention of comparing myself to such a noble princess, and of course, being on top of a billiards table instead of a bed, I couldn't hope for a prince's kiss—but, even so, I awoke.

(Awoke? As in, your sleeping power did? That's amazing; it's like something from a shounen manga.)

(What's so good about that? It wasn't such a thrilling turn of events. It was one of those realistic, pessimistic, logical consequences that Dramaturgie-san likes.) The briar thorn

brought to mind Sleeping Beauty for me, but for a specialist like Dramaturgie-san, it was purely an item used for oddity extermination.

Like crosses and holy water, garlic and silver bullets, the briar plant repels demons; Dramaturgie-san could use it to commit suicide because he was a vampire himself.

A vampire who hunts vampires; a specialist who kills his own kind… That is Dramaturgie-san's true form.

(Oh, now that you mention it, that's right…)

(Please don't pretend like you forgot that—it's a given, isn't it? A huge given. That's why he could scout out Araragi-kun, right?)

(Then I suppose you ought to have taken how he said "for the twins' own sake" and "not for the sake of humans" just as it was.)

Yes.

As a vampire extermination item was a weapon to him, it could also be used for suicide—

inserting it into his back teeth was really no different from inserting a capsule of cyanide.

It would only prove effective as a demon repellent for a vampire, but if you were to say it would be meaningless to use it on a human—sometimes a lure, sometimes a toy—like me, then…

you'd be wrong.

Wrong.

(Wrong?)

(Indeed. And surely you won't pretend you've forgotten that, right? When half my insides were gouged out and I was about to

die, it was none other than you who saved me using vampire blood, Oshino-san.)

Vampire blood.

When my whole side got torn off, when there was nothing left for me but death—that's how I was saved.

So they tell me.

Unfortunately, I have no memories from that time.

(Nah, I didn't save you. You saved yourself, missy—though if I really have to say, it was Araragi-kun.)

That's right.

The vampire blood was Araragi-kun's blood, since he was a vampire at the time; consequently, that meant it was also Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade's blood.

The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire.

The blood of the king of oddities was a component of my body.

It was my blood, and my flesh.

It was my bones, and my guts.

Reading too much into that, you might be led to believe that such a component being implanted in me was the reason I attracted the sawarineko oddity during Golden Week at the end of spring break, but regardless, that element was lying dormant inside of me.

You could also say it was sleeping.

So if that flesh and blood, those bones and guts are stimulated by a briar thorn, what would happen?

I don't know what will happen, but something will happen.

If a normal vampire underwent stimulation from a demon-repelling briar, they probably just sustain damage—depending on the circumstance, it may simply result in suicide.

But this was blood from none other than Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade, who had overcome all the usual weak points of vampires—a prime specimen among prime specimens.

"I don't know what will happen."

Dramaturgie-san's words ought to have been taken at face value, just as they were.

Really, when the oddity killer's sleeping blood inside of me woke up, it wouldn't have been strange for my body to shatter.

(True. It was beyond a risky bet; it was a dangerous bet. Risking your life like that, isn't that no different from what you did before, Miss Class Rep?)

(Yes, I regret giving myself over to rage—but after all, my life was about to be torn away on top of a game table.)

(So, what happened?)

I don't know precisely what happened.

Later, Dramaturgie-san's analysis as a specialist was that when I received stimulation from the briar thorn, my instantly revitalized body temporarily manifested the power of a vampire—if so, then instead of white hair I may have turned blond, instead of cat's eyes my eyes may have turned golden, and instead of cat ears I may have grown fangs.

It's a character design I would hate to see in the mirror—but luckily enough, vampires don't appear in mirrors.

In any case, when I came to, I'd torn off the bindings on the game table like they were nothing, and knocked down the vampire twins; the one who least understood what had happened might have been me.

(Heh. So the battle scene was just one cut, like in shounen manga? Well, I suppose it would be.

They might all be vampires, and rare specimens at that, but Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade is one-of-a-kind.)

(Though if I recall correctly, I believe there was a person who tore out that one-of-a-kind vampire's heart…)

(Wow, who was that again? Must've been quite the guy. …But for someone who won a risky gamble and survived quite a predicament, Miss Class Rep, why the long face?) (……)

(Was there a sudden turn of events afterward or something?) There wasn't.

With the overwhelming difference in power between us, there was no sudden turn of events, nor was there a counterattack.

As if they'd seen a monstrous apparition, the vampire twins, High-Waist and Low-Rise stared at me through bloodshot eyes—this time, they stared at me, not each other.

"What are you?" "?uoy era tahW"

They accused me.

"A specialist?" "?tsilaiceps A"

"Or a vampire?" "?eripmav a rO"

"No, I'm a high school girl from Japan."

I answered.

"I would love some help to be happy just being friends with the boy I like…"

"……" "……"

The twins appeared to find my clear-cut answer rather impossible to understand.

The next moment, without any communication, without any preparation, they sunk their teeth into each other.

There was no time to stop them.

The twins thrust their fangs into each other's bodies, sucking blood and consuming flesh—all I could do was watch the sublime sight.

Ah, yes.

I ought to have known.

Since it was something I know, I ought to have known.

I had heard that nine out of ten vampires die by suicide.

Suicide due to boredom, or due to weariness with life.

For that part, even the legendary oddity killer capable of manifesting overwhelming power, Kiss-Shot Acerola-Orion Heart-Under-Blade was a vampire who had desired suicide.

She came to Japan in order to commit suicide.

Boredom kills a man, and boredom kills the soul too.

(…They say only humans take the lives of other animals for purposes besides eating them, but if that's true, then humans are the only creatures who know play. Play to distract from boredom

—but conversely, that may mean we can't live without playing. That's why High-Waist and Low-Rise, who'd picked up culture and interests, didn't hesitate to choose death when their play was obstructed.)

Telling them not to play was the same as telling them not to live.

Of course, having said that, I couldn't become their plaything, nor could I be fine with them kidnapping travelers and making them their playthings.

However, if I say the twins were sinful, then driving them to eat each other and erase each other's existences was just as sinful.

I compelled the sinful twins into abstinence.

I was a terribly greedy being.

011

"…That's about how it went. There wasn't any particular punch line, but how did you like it?"

I thanked Oshino-san for listening quietly, and he replied, "It was fascinating"—it seemed less like he thought it fascinating and more like he was amused by it, but the fact that it pleased him was the more important thing.

"Unlike Araragi-kun's emotion-filled stories, yours was rich in implications, Miss Class Rep. Not implication so much as sarcasm, perhaps. As a specialist, there were new things for me to learn."

"I hardly think so… I was made aware of my own ignorance throughout."

But it was no time to feel ashamed.

"S-so, Oshino-san. The story is over, and we can go back to Japan together now—"

"But, Miss Class Rep, your story doesn't end there, does it?" he said.

Oshino-san produced a cigarette from his breast pocket, put it in his mouth without lighting it, and continued.

"You say the Heart-Under-Blade lying dormant inside you woke up temporarily, like an acute reaction due to stimulation from the briar thorn; but right now, I can't sense that element sleeping inside you at all. You're completely you."

"……"

"Before you got here, before you found me, you somehow used it all up—those idle assets of yours, or rather, that idle blood of

yours.(1) So you must have had lots of experiences after that one, right?"

I'd love to hear about those things.

As long as time permits.

Urged on in that cynical manner, I reluctantly decided to continue the story.

"Hm, so… As promised, Dramaturgie-san inquired at his organization, and based on that information the next country I visited was—"

Our conversation went on and on; the story went on and on.

My journey dedicated to Araragi-kun seemed far from over.

Afterword

Although Queen Marie Antoinette is purported to have said, “If they do not have bread, let them eat cake,” it seems she did not actually say that. This kind of thing is fairly common—

Oda Nobunaga didn’t say, “If you do not sing for me, little bird, I will kill you”; Thomas Edison did say, “Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety nine percent perspiration,” but he meant something else; Emperor Napoleon didn’t say, “The word ‘impossible’ is not in my dictionary,”

but rather, “French has no such word as 'impossible'”, and so on; these aren’t just a few famous exceptions, but rather, history’s famous sayings are generally repeated through the impressions they make, and if the person who spoke them heard them now, it would probably not be what they intended. Setting aside sayings that leave a good impression like Mr.

Edison’s, I expect Mr. Oda would be rather upset. Perhaps he would react, “Really? People think I’m the kind of guy who says stuff like that?” Incidentally, this kind of thing can be a big nuisance when it comes to novelists; if you admire a wise saying left behind by an old literary master, sometimes you do some research and find that it’s a line in their work, and you become confused about how to interpret it. You feel like they’ve told you, “Authors are not their work.

Please enjoy this purely as fiction"—that's not a real quote either. By the way, misgivings like,

"They might have said it, but it just wasn't recorded," are quite possible since there's no way to prove something wasn't said; however, given that Queen Marie Antoinette was almost certainly a stylish person, it's hard to believe she really mixed up bread and cake, which have different amounts of calories.

With that said, this was the second installment of the Monogatari Series Off Season. Like the previous book Orokamonogatari, it is a collection of zeroth episodes: "Episode Zero: Acerola Bon Appétit", "Episode Zero: Karen Ogre", and "Episode Zero: Tsubasa Sleeping". Like, thereafter begins a new story. The fairy tale of "Princess Beauty" included at the beginning,

previously published in an anime fanbook, is a prequel both to Shinobu Oshino's story and Kizumonogatari, which ought to be called the starting point of the Monogatari series; as such, I believe the past, present, and future are all connected in this novel. I hope you enjoyed reading in four dimensions, disregarding the concept of time and reading multiple timelines at once.

This has been a book I wrote purely out of my own interest, the second installment of the Monogatari Series Off Season, Wazamonogatari. Bon appétit!

On the front cover is Mr. VOFAN's illustration of Shinobu in early childhood form (about ten years old) from Karen Ogre.

Thank you very much! Speaking of which, every time the one who named her, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicide-Master, died in the story, her body grew more and more childlike. It was a bit of narrative trickery. She didn't mention it herself, so you wouldn't realize, but Tropicalesque must have thought, "How pitiful!" Off Season will continue for another two volumes; thank you for reading.

Nishio Ishin

HUGE thanks to Mirrored Translations (https://mirroredtranslations.tumblr.com/)